



8 II

INFINITE STRATOS

YUMIZURU Izuru
Illustration: CHOCO

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

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INFINITE STRATOS 8

YUMIZURU Izuru
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Laura: "L-Like this?"

Chart: "I-Ichika... Do... Do you want to see more?"

Cecilia:
"It may be embarrassing,
but it feels so sublime..."

Ling: "So maybe... Maybe today's the day?"



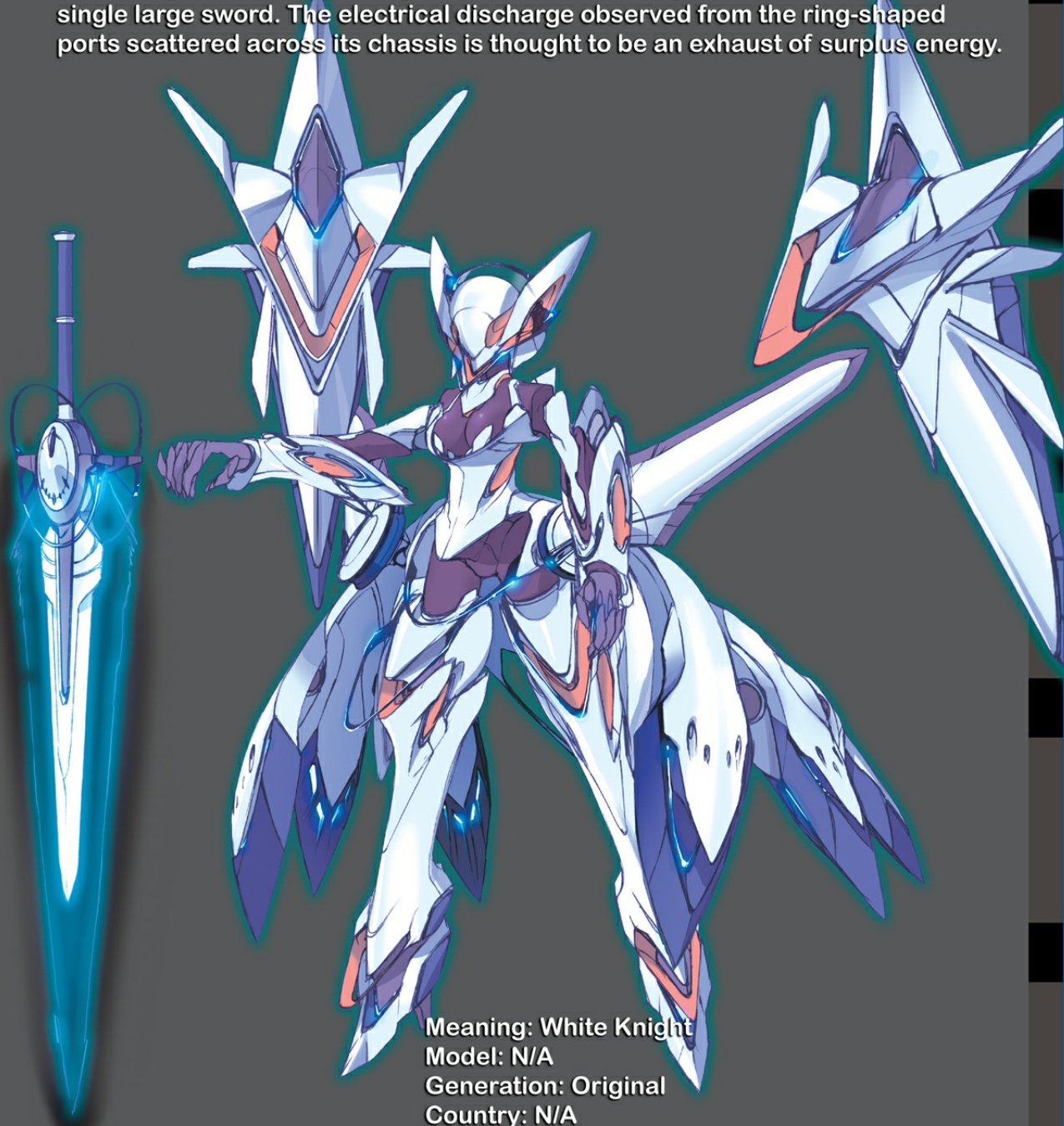
“Q-Quad Phalanx!”

IS
Infinite Stratos 8: Visualization of Stories

*No longer a mobile weapon, but a turret of incomparable
firepower—between its weight and the anti-recoil stabilizers.*

Created by Shinonono Tabane, this is the world's first IS, and the model for all which came after. Its pilot, their affiliation, and their objective, remain shrouded in mystery, but its graceful form gave it the name "White Knight."

An examination of footage from the White Knight Incident, its only public appearance, reveals a smaller, more humanlike form than modern IS. It consists of a full-face helmet which conceals the identity of its pilot, and skirtlike parts which may be shields or a large active thruster, alongside an armament of a single large sword. The electrical discharge observed from the ring-shaped ports scattered across its chassis is thought to be an exhaust of surplus energy.



Meaning: White Knight
Model: N/A
Generation: Original
Country: N/A
Classification: N/A
Equipment: Melee Plasma Blade
Armor: N/A
Features: N/A

A French mass-produced second-generation IS, and the last of its generation to reach the market. Its versatility and mobility, along with the wide variety of aftermarket weaponry and packages available, contribute to its continuing popularity and an overall third place share of global IS adoption.

Of note is its large number of available expansion slots, allowing each individual Rafale Revive to deploy a wide range of weaponry.

Along with the IS rifle depicted here, it can equip artillery howitzers, infantry rocket launchers, and even anti-air missiles without modification. Its high number of wired hardpoints and weapons racks give it the nickname 'The Flying Arsenal.'

Quad Gatling Package:

A quad-linked assembly of the standard seven-barrel 25mm gatling gun. The addition of four auxiliary legs, drum magazines, and additional control apparatus produce a hail of fire which can tear through even the last-ditch defenses of an enemy IS.

Japanese Name: "Shippuu" ("Gale")

Model: RR-08

Generation: Second

Country: France

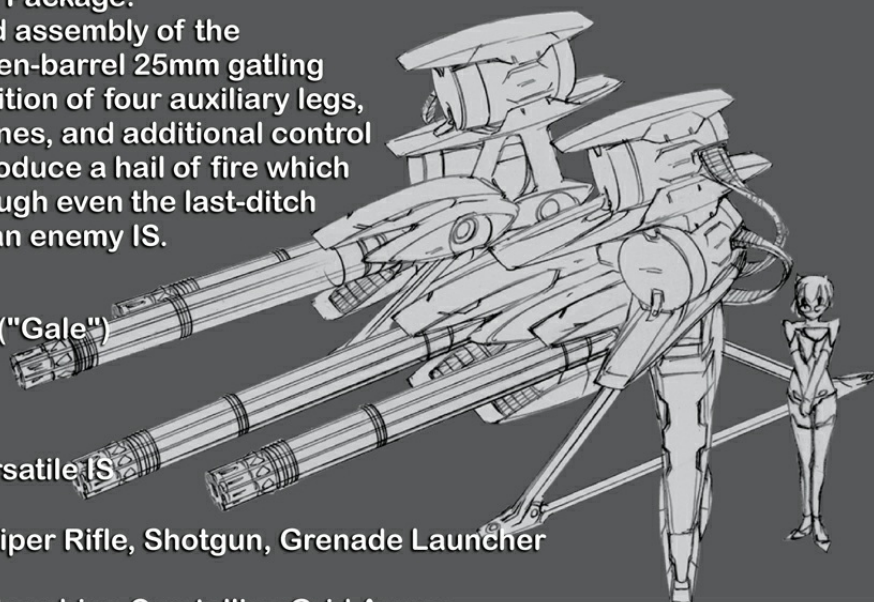
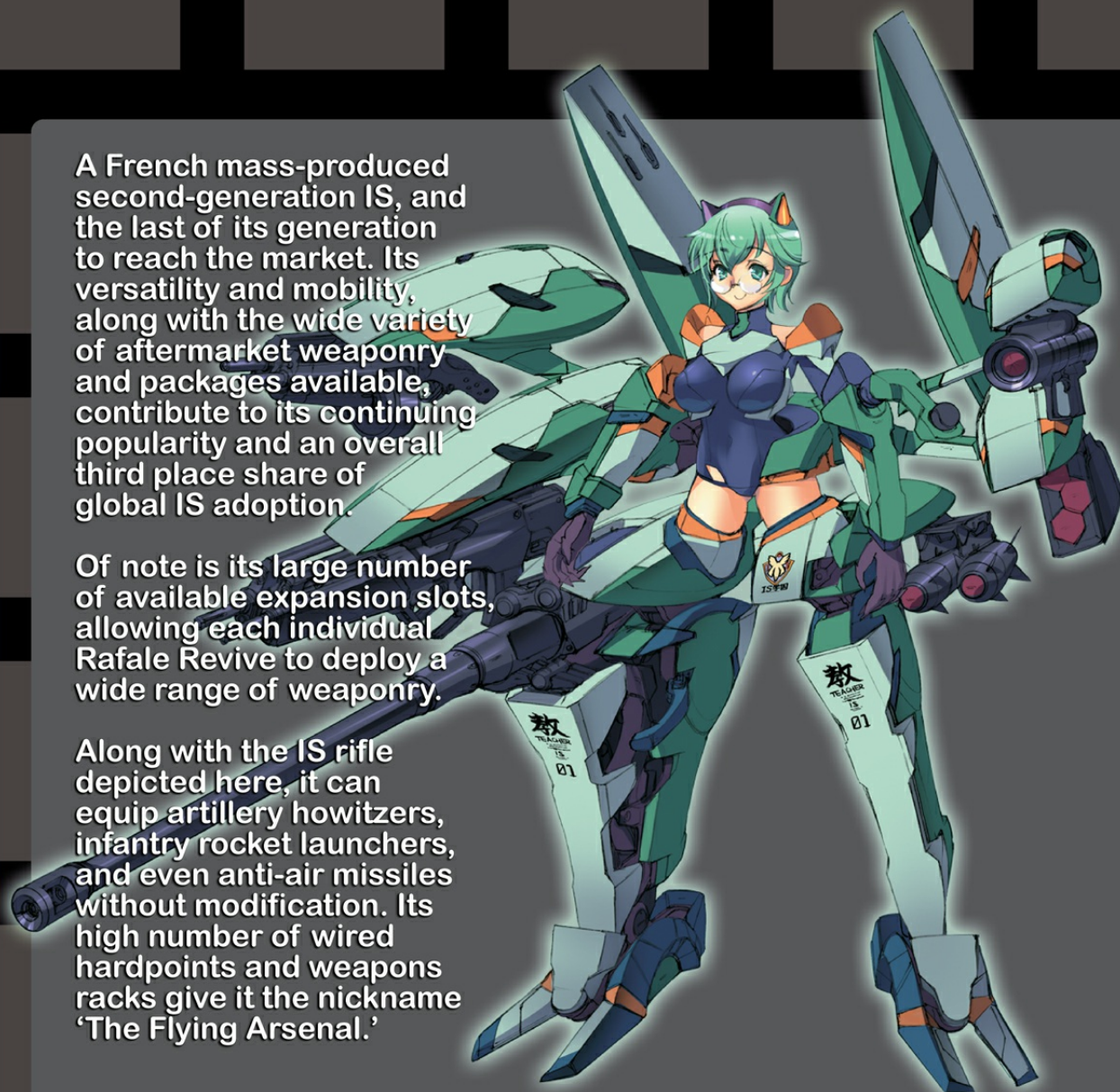
Classification: All-Range Versatile IS

Equipment: 2x Shield

Assault Rifle, Sniper Rifle, Shotgun, Grenade Launcher
Multithruster

Armor: Shock-Absorbing Crystalline Grid Armor

Features: Enhanced Expansion Slot Capacity, Multi-Weapon Rack



Squall MEUSEL Right



left Chloë CHRONICLE





Orimura Ichika

The only male in the world who can pilot an IS.
Personal IS: Byakushiki



Shinonono Houki

His childhood friend.
Personal IS: Akatsubaki



Cecilia Alcott

English national cadet
Personal IS: Blue Tears



Huang Lingyin

Chinese national cadet
Personal IS: Shenlong



Charles Dunois

The French National Cadet.

Personal IS: Rafale Revive Custom II



Laura Bodewig

The German National Cadet.

Personal IS: Schwarzer Regen



Tatenashi Sarashiki

IS Academy Student Council President.

Personal IS: Mysterious Lady



Kanzashi Sarashiki

Japanese National Cadet.

Personal IS: Uchigane Nishiki

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Strange Days Again

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Brynhildr

Chapter III

World Purge

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Epilogue

The Knight Rests Under the Cherry Trees



Chapter I: Strange Days Again

“So?”

“Ah...”

It was after classes let out, in the café area of the dining hall, and Ling was staring Kanzashi down from across the table. Kanzashi didn't know why she was there, or why she was being treated like this. She cringed backward into her seat, from the interrogation and her own natural shyness. *Why... Why are they treating me like this...*

It wasn't just the two of them—Houki, Cecilia, Charlotte, and Laura were there too. If Ichika showed up, it'd be all seven first years with their own IS gathered in one place. Seven people. Meaning, seven IS. Enough firepower to take on a great power.

“C'mon, Ling. Calm down. Look at her, she's terrified.” Charlotte stood up as she tried to calm everyone down with her natural kindness.

“Back off, Charlotte. If this doesn't work, I've half a mind to try chains or Pentothal.” Laura, her arms and legs crossed and a deep scowl on her face, was having none of it. At least she didn't have a knife or a Mauser in her hands. Yet.

“You don't have to be like that, Laura. Here, Kanzashi. You must be thirsty. You can have my orange juice.”

Kanzashi nervously looked up at Charlotte; she responded with a smile. *Well... At least she's on my side...* Kanzashi brought the juice to her lips as she thought.

A sip or two later, Charlotte, without dropping her gleaming smile, asked, “So, be honest with us, how's it going~”

Kanzashi wasn't sure what she meant by that. As she tried to politely play it off with an awkward smile, both Houki and Cecilia brought their fists down on the table while standing up.

“D-Don't play dumb! She means, with Ichika!”

“Are, are, are you two going out?!”

“Ah—” Kanzashi gasped, blinking in surprise at the sudden question, and turned beet-red a moment later as it sunk in. “Ichika and I... Aren’t like—”

“‘Ichika,’ huh?!” Ling fired back.

What, she’s not even calling him Orimura anymore? There’s gotta be something going on then... Wait. Didn’t I just do the same? Okay, yeah, I guess that’s no big deal. Ling cooled off as quickly as she’d just come to a boil.

Then, as five stares pierced through Kanzashi, she began to speak timidly. “I... I mean, ummm... It’d be nice if we were, but we’re not... That’s how it is...”



Her voice, always quiet, was swallowed up by the pressure she felt from the other girls. The last few words couldn't even be made out, but her blush, her stare at the table, her fiddling fingers, each put one shared thought in the minds of the five: *'More competition, huh.'*

Kanzashi quietly shrunk behind the glass of juice, trying to hide behind it like a scared kitten. As they realized she wasn't going out with Ichika, the others took pity on her and tried to change the topic.

"Ahh, I see, umm. Sarashiki?"

"You... You can call me Kanzashi..." Houki asked nervously, and Kanzashi answered just as nervously.

"All right. Same goes for us, then."

"Y-Yeah..." Rin, meanwhile, was as blunt as ever, and Kanzashi was a little more firm in reply.

"Anyway, ah— I apologize. It was unbecoming of us to simply bring you here without warning."

"I... It just surprised me." Cecilia forced a friendly smile, and Kanzashi, embarrassed to have worried her, awkwardly smiled back in return.

"Er, anyway. Would you like another juice?"

"I'm fine." Kanzashi gently waved away the menu Charlotte held out.

"Oh, I know. We're all in the same year. Why don't we practice together sometime?"

"Y-Yeah. Thanks." The mixture of force and tenderness in Laura's voice, as she sat back down with her arms crossed, made Kanzashi gulp as she nodded twice in response.

"Phew..."

All six let out a sigh of relief at the same time. They each looked around at each other in surprise, then broke out in laughter.

"Hahaha, we're so silly." Charlotte, with impeccable timing, held out her hand to Kanzashi. "Anyway, it'll be nice to have you around."

“Y-Yeah... You too...”

As Kanzashi and Charlotte shook hands, the others nodded. And thus, a cloud over each of their hearts faded away, with the arrival of a new rival—but also a new friend.



“Zzzzzzzzzzzzz...”

Ichika was asleep in his room, minutes before the rays of the sun would begin filtering in through the window. A shadow, with breath bated, loomed over him.

Her name was Laura Bodewig. This wasn’t the first time she’d infiltrated Ichika’s room while he slept—but it *was* the first time she’d tried it in her black cat pajamas. The idea of this new twist made her pulse pound. *Calm down, calm down. Just do it like you practiced!* She ran over the plan in her head to stay focused as she wormed her way under Ichika’s blanket.

[Beeeep. Intruder detected. Intruder detected.] Suddenly, a mechanical voice rang out.

“What’s going on?!” With a pop, his blanket suddenly inflated, pressing her against the mattress. “Grrgh...”

The pressure was too much. Her arms were trapped, unable to reach her knife so she could cut her way out.

“Damn you...”

Laura knew of only one person who would set this sort of trap.

“Ahahahaha! Caught you, Laura!” She could hear a loud laugh from the attached shower.

“Sarashiki Tatenashi...”

“That’s right! It’s me, Sarashiki Tatenashi! IS Academy’s student council president, and the strongest—”

Tatenashi’s voice was drowned out by Ichika’s groans of pain, “I’m gonna die if I don’t get unstuck from under here...”

“Ah!”

Pop! The sound of a bursting balloon echoed through the first year dorms.



“Ugh... That was terrible...”

I rubbed my neck, trying to take off some of the pain, as I changed into my uniform. We were having physicals today. And there was a problem with that. The problem was that I was assigned to help out with the measurements. *Whyyyyyyyy.*

I could just imagine Tatenashi’s giggle and the look on her face. *‘Measurements’ doesn’t just mean their height, either, does it. Why are the teachers even allowing this?!* I waited, alone, in classroom 1-A. Soon—

“Oh, sorry to keep you waiting, Orimura. I needed to get all the paperwork together.”

“Ms. Yamada?!” Yamada Maya walked into the classroom as she spoke. In my mind I’d thought she’d come back with good news. “Oh, good! You’re doing the measuring? I guess the adults did decide to step in.”

“Mhm. I’ll make sure everything gets noted down correctly!”

“...Whaa?”

“Hm? I’m just writing everything down.”

Wh-Wh-Wh...

“WHAT THE HELL ARE THEY THINKING?!” My scream fell on deaf ears, as the girls of class 1-A energetically filed into the room.

“Oh, it’s Orimura!”

“Is he really going to be measuring us?”

“No way! I shouldn’t have had seconds at dinner last night!”

“Heeeey, Orimu! Hehe, looks like Tat’s secret plan is a hit!”

Oh, I definitely knew who I wanted to hit right then.

“All right, now quiet down, everyone. Today’s measurements will be used for IS suit fitting, so remember, don’t wear any more than you have to during them!” Ms. Yamada was obviously enjoying this. But for me, it was like hearing my death sentence read out. “Be sure to take off your gym uniforms! You shouldn’t be in anything but your underwear!”

Yeah. I’m dead. D-e-a-d, dead.

“Of course, we have a curtain, so you can step inside, undress, be measured, and then redress. That way, no one else will see you in your underwear.”

“Won’t you see them, Ms. Yamada?!” I exploded in rage, determined to escape the tyranny of the physicals.

But Orimura Ichika did not understand the female heart. Orimura Ichika was a boy. He had spent his youth hanging out with other boys, playing games with them. Yet still, he was more sensitive than most to girls—or at least, to their physical attributes.

Run, Ichika. Dazai Osamu, my favorite author. It would be an honor to meet him, soon, in heaven.

“I’ll be just on the other side of the curtain. You can just read the numbers over to me.”

“WHAT THE HELL?!” I was beyond rage, beyond fury. My senses had left me.

“What’s your problem?”

“HEY! Is that you, Chifu—”

“Call me Ms. Orimura.”

A beautiful chop to my neck. It felt great. A comfy 32 degrees.

“Can’t you be proud of your work?”

“No, wait, this is all wrong! It’s a trap!”

“Why don’t you just grow a pair.”

“Grr...”

“I wanna hear an ‘All right, I’ll do this!’”

...OK, Chifuyu!

“I’ll do this! My bestial instincts have awakened!”

“Good. Do your best, then.”

“Wait, what?”

“You just said you were going to do it, right?”

“Y-Yes...” I couldn’t argue with the glare she was giving me. I could hear the Reaper’s scythe, whistling toward my neck.

“You look like you’re going to hang yourself. Here, you can use this blindfold.”

“Oh, thanks!”

What a lifesaver! She was the best!

“Anyway.” I saluted Chifuyu, as she left as swiftly as she had arrived. Thank you, Chifuyu. Thank you, Ms. Orimura.

All right, then, blindfold on. I pulled it tight around my head.

“Wait, I can see right through this!”

I heard Chifuyu’s laugh from all the way out in the hallway. Everyone was against me!

“Seat number one, Aikawa Kyoko!”

“Wait, waaait!”

“Tee-hee, too late!”

She stepped inside the curtain with me, wearing only a bra and panties. *I know! I just have to look away! The mind’s eye! The third eye!* I squeezed my eyes shut, and stretched out the measuring tape in my hands.

“Here goes.”

“Okay!”

Squish.

“Wait...”

“Eek! Don’t be so sudden, Orimura!”

“No, wait, I was just—”

Squish, squish. My hand sunk into something soft.

“.....”

Squish, squish, squish.

“Wait, that’s... Oh... Oh God, yes...”

Ah... I was dead.

“ICHIKAAAAAAA! YOU SCUMBAAAAAAG!”

One Houki,

“What on earth are you doing, Ichika?!”

One Cecilia,

“Ichika, you pervert! I can’t believe you!”

One Charl,

“Ichika. How would you like to die?”

and One Laura appear!

Your foes suddenly mount an attack!

► [FIGHT] [SPELL] [PARRY] [RUN]

[FIGHT] [SPELL] [PARRY] ► [RUN]

“I’ve gotta get aw— GYAAAAAAH!”

Ichika is dead.

Na-na-na-na na-na-na-na naa naa naa naa naa naa.



Oh, for shame, Ichika! You died!

W-Who are you?!

“Dazai Osamu.”

Ehh?!

“I’m just kidding.”

Oh, right...

“Still, it’s shameful for you to panic just from seeing a girl in her underwear. You’re *No Longer Human*.”

Huh. Maybe this really is Dazai—

“Ichika... Ichika, open your eyes...”

Someone was calling out to me...

“C’mon! Wake the hell up, Ichika!”

“Wuh?!”

Smack! My alarm clock was a punch to the face.

“What are you doing, Rin?!”

“I should ask you that! I’m stuck here until we measure you too, and you’re just sitting there dozed off!”

Rin was visibly angry. Oh, and I was in the nurse’s office.

“Now hurry up and strip! I’ll measure you just this once!”

“Er... Okay.” I stumbled, still a bit dazed, out of the cot, and began to undress.

“W-Wait! You can leave your pants on, idiot!”

“Oh, okay.” I wobbled.

“C’mon, what’s wrong with you? Put your arms up!”

“Okay...”

Rin was in the shirt and bloomers that were the IS Academy gym uniform. The lithe, fit lines of her body were almost feline. Her thighs, curved in all the right places, hinted at the energy within. It was quite a sight.

“All right, your chest is— Wait, Ichika!”

“Bwuh?”

“Your face is all red, and you have a nosebleed! Let me take your temperature.”

“Kay...”

Something wasn't right. I couldn't... Move...

Thud.

“Hey, c'mon. C'mon, Ichika! What's wrong?!”



“I told you, I'll watch over him!”

“Why do you have to hog him for yourself, Houki?!”

“Like you have room to talk! You had your turn in the nurse's office! Share!”

“Can we all just calm down?”

“No! I won't let any of you take my bride!”

I could hear people arguing, but what they were arguing over, I didn't know. What I did know for sure, however, was that they were being awfully loud.

“Urrrgh...” I forced a sound out.

“Oh, Ichika! You're awake!”

“Are you okay?!”

“Ichika! Hold on!”

“Are you all right?”

“Do you need hydration? Nutrition?”

Ugh. My head...

“Quiet down...” I slumped out of the bed, down to the floor.

“All of you! You're just getting in the way! Get out of here!”

“You first, Houki!”

“Quiet down, both of you!”

“Ichika, I’ll help you get back into bed.”

“My bride’s care is my responsibility, my privilege!”

They started arguing again. As the world swam around me, I heard the door open.

Click. Step, step step.

“All of you.”

Slap.

“Stop this.”

Slap. Slap.

“Now.”

Slap. Slap.

“Now get out of here. Kanzashi, can you lift his legs for me?”

Ah... This must have been Tatenashi and Kanzashi... The crowd quieted down, no doubt rubbing the welts her fan had left on their foreheads.

“The last thing he needs is a commotion like that. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am...”

“All right, if you realize that, you should realize that it’s time to leave.”

The five shuffled out, their enthusiasm punctured. I could barely tell what was going on, but it seemed like Tatenashi and Kanzashi were caring for me. Tatenashi brought food and water, while Kanzashi kept my face cool with a damp cloth.

“Um...” I tried to pull myself upright and speak.

“You don’t have to push yourself. Just get some rest.”

“Okay... Um. About the others...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t be too hard on them... They have their differences sometimes, but they’re good people...”

I wanted to at least clear that up.

“Mhm...” Tatenashi sighed, rolling her eyes. “Did you five hear that?”

I heard my door rattle as some sort of response.

“Tatenashi, should I let them in?”

“I suppose. They’ve learned their lesson by now.”

After she spoke, the five entered, slowly and timidly.

“I’m sorry, Ichika...”

“I shouldn’t have done that.”

“My apologies, Ichika.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Sorry.”

Houki, Rin, Cecilia, Charl, and Laura, in that order. Each bowed apologetically. I replied with a wan smile and let out a quiet “It’s fine.”

“I guess this is the bond you’ve forged.” Tatenashi smiled, even more beautifully than usual.



A few days later, during a joint training exercise for the first years...

Chifuyu, her arms folded like usual, faced the entire first year lined up in a straight row.

“Orimura, Shinonono, Alcott, Dunois, Bodewig, Huang, Sarashiki! Step forward!” First up on the agenda were the students with their own IS. “Each of your IS took heavy damage during the recent attack. While they’re regenerating, you’re strictly forbidden from any use of them.”

“Yes, ma’am!” They’d known that much even before she told them, and their lack of hesitation in agreement showed as much.

“Therefore... Well, I’ll let Ms. Yamada explain.”

“Yes! If I could have your attention over here, please.”

Ms. Yamada motioned to a row of shipping containers behind her, as if inviting them to take a closer look. Everyone had been wondering what those were since they filed into the fields, and now, the class was abuzz with anticipation. The drive to make conversation at any opportunity must be unique to teenage girls.

“What are those?”

“Wait, are they new IS?”

“Really? Wouldn’t those be set up in hangars instead?”

“Y’know, I wonder. Something’s pretty funny about this.”

That last one was Miss Casual, as if there was any question.

“Quiet down! Don’t you know how to keep your mouths shut for a minute?” Chifuyu barked. “Ms. Yamada. Open them up.”

“All right! Open sesame!” The assembled first years looked around in confusion, and Maya’s eyes glistened as she pressed a button on a remote controller. “Ugh, it sucks getting old...”

With a whirr, motors inside the containers began to push the containers’ covers open.

“These are...” Ichika sounded shocked. “...What are these, again?”

Smack! Chifuyu’s clipboard was super effective. Ichika took 30 damage!

Rubbing his head, he turned his eyes back to the container. Inside were hulking metal forms in the shape of armor.

“Lehrerin, are these—”

“Call me Ms. Orimura.”

Something was stirring Laura’s memory—enough that she reverted to modes of address from the Bundeswehr, to Chifuyu’s chagrin. Seeing her reaction, Laura nervously clammed up.

“This is the EOS exoskeleton assault armor under development by the U.N.”

“EOS?”

“It’s short for Extended Operation Seeker. It’s designed for missions like disaster recovery and peacekeeping.”

“Ms. Orimura? How do we...” Houki nervously began to ask.

Chifuyu’s answer was simple and direct. “Try it on.”

“Eh?!” Ichika and the six girls gaped.

“Don’t make me tell you twice. The higher-ups were told to get some operational data on it. And since you’re all without IS for the moment, you’ve been volunteered.”

“O-Okay...” They managed a weak response.

Behind them, Maya was already clapping out marching orders to the rest of the class, “All right! I want you to form up into groups and get ready for mock battles using the trainer IS. Could you bring them from the hangars?”

The cries of dismay from the girls hoping to see the EOS in action were quickly silenced by a glare from Chifuyu. Meanwhile, she kept the cadets’ minds from wandering too far with quick raps from her clipboard.

“Hurry it up, you idiots. We don’t have all day. Or, what? Are you worried you’ll have a hard time with these?”

“Why, Ms. Orimura. As national cadets, I’m sure we’ll have no problem at all.” Cecilia, for one, was confident.

“Oh? Really. Show me, then.”

Nervously, under Chifuyu’s smug grin, the seven began to strap themselves in.

Moving the EOS around was slow and laborious, more like lifting it than moving it at will. Their brows furrowed as they strained against their own limbs.

“Ugh, this piece of...”

“This is...”

“Rather heavy... Aren’t they...”

“Gimme a break...”

“This is pretty tough...”

Ichika, Houki, Cecilia, Ling, Charlotte. Each was having trouble with the EOS. After all, it was heavy. Lighter than an IS, to be sure, but an IS is equipped with a Passive Inertial Canceler anti-gravity system and an array of auxiliary motors and power assist functions to take the weight off its operator. The EOS, on the other hand, was just a lump of metal. What assists it had was far below the level of an IS, and energy consumption prevented its constant use to boot. And unlike an IS’ Direct Motion System which predicted its pilot’s movements, the EOS inevitably lagged behind.

Worse yet was the huge backpack each pilot was equipped with. It was called a ‘portable plasma battery,’ but over 30 kilograms was pushing the limits of ‘portable.’ Even with that, the EOS could only be run at full power for around ten minutes. It definitely impressed on each of them just how advanced IS were.

Still, Laura, who had quietly run through the motions, soon gave a confident nod.

“Now that you’re settled in, it’s time for a mock battle in the EOS. Remember, the only protection they have is the armor, so don’t aim directly for the opposing pilot. We’re only using paintballs, but it’ll still sting pretty bad if you get hit.” Chifuyu clapped to draw their attention.

As her yell of ‘Start!’ rang out, Laura immediately used the foot-mounted wheels to close in on Ichika, who was still struggling with the controls.

“Gwuh?!”

“Hmph. You’re too slow!” Dodging his clumsy punch, she darted in and swept his legs out from under him.

“Ugh!” As Ichika tumbled to the ground, she nimbly pulled out her EOS’s submachine gun and squeezed off a three-round burst. Her next target was Cecilia.

“Got you!”

“I won’t be that easy to take down!” Cecilia fired away in full auto mode, but her aim was poor. “Ugh! I can’t believe the recoil...”

An IS was equipped with auto-balancers and the PIC's reactive controller, making it fully able to compensate for both recoil and weight shifts in melee. An EOS, on the other hand, was not, and relied on the pilot's own strength to compensate.

"Hmph! Gunpowder is fussy enough to deal with, even in an IS!"

Cecilia may have had a tough time at first, but she was still a national cadet. Her military training helped her get the hang of the EOS fast. But Laura's training was better. Before Cecilia was able to fully come to grips with her gun, she closed in with a zig-zag motion.

"You're quite fast! But closing in will just make it easier to hit you."

"How foolish can you be?"

Laura suddenly charged forward toward Cecilia, rather than the arced path she'd taken while evading Ichika's counter, blocking her return fire with the shield on her left arm.

"What?!"

"Pfft." Laura shoved Cecilia's shoulder armor with an open-palm strike.

"Eek!" Losing her balance, Cecilia tumbled onto her back. With the weight of the EOS, she'd have a very hard time getting up. The EOS featured a pushing arm on its back for just such a situation, but it was already too late. Before Cecilia could get back on her feet, Laura sprayed her with a hail of paintballs.

"Two down!"

"And a perfect opening for me!" Ling charged from the side at full speed.
"Gotcha!"

In came a haymaker punch with the full weight of the EOS behind it. Laura twisted her body, letting it brush by her.

"Huh?" Unable to control her momentum, Ling tumbled with a resounding clang.

"That leaves..." Laura looked up to see Houki and Charlotte side by side.
"Who's first?"

“I-I’ll go second!”

“Me too...”

Houki and Charl argued energetically over who would have to be first.

“Charlotte, why don’t you go?”

“No, no, you first.”

“You don’t have to worry about being polite.”

“No, I insist.”

“.....”

“.....”

“All right, I’ll go.”

“I’ll go!”

“No, I will.”

“Go right ahead, then!”

Ahh, the beauty of Japanese politeness. But that last volunteer was Laura.

“Eh?”

Houki and Charlotte looked at each other in shock, but it was already too late. The servos driving Laura’s wheels whined as she closed in.

“T-Take this!”

“Sorry, Laura!” Having seen Ling’s faceplant, the impromptu tag team opted for ranged combat over melee. But while Charl kept her balance as she opened up some distance, Houki miscalculated and fell backward onto her butt. She was promptly met by a shower of paintballs.

“Got you!”

“Oww! Stop it, you idiot! That hurts! It hurts!” Laura, uncaring, emptied her clip into Houki before throwing the spent gun at Charlotte.

“Huh?!”

“Sorry.” Speeding in, Laura gave Charlotte a two-palmed shove as she

crouched for balance.

“W-Whoa!”

“Hmm. You kept your footing.”

“Ehehe...”

“Let’s try that again, then.”

Slam! The second shove was more successful than the first.

“Whoaaa!”

Just like Cecilia, Charlotte tilted over backward. But a moment before she hit the ground, she curled into a tumble and regained her balance.

“All right, that’s enough!” Chifuyu called an end to the EOS mock battle. “Not too shabby, Bodewig.”

“I owe it all to mein Lehrerin in the Bundeswehr—”

Smack! This time, the clipboard held a spec sheet rather than a class roster, but it didn’t seem to reduce its effectiveness at all. “I told you. Call me Ms. Orimura.”

“Yes, ma’am...” As Laura rubbed her head, the others, having taken off their EOSes, gathered.

“Laura, have you used an EOS before?”

“No, not really, but the Bundeswehr has something similar. It’s used for testing experimental IS equipment,” Laura quickly replied to Ichika’s question.

The next was Charlotte’s, “Wow, and you were still that impressive in it?”

“I wasn’t that impressive, was I?”

“If that wasn’t impressive, what is? Jeez.” The only way Ling could salvage her utter defeat was with an attempt at wit.

“It’s more like the rest of you were... Pff— Ahahahahaha!” Laura suddenly broke out in laughter. It was only when Ichika and the others looked at each other that they realized why—the blotches of paint all over their faces and clothes.

“Dammit, Laura, you were aiming for my face, weren’t you.”

“I-I just missed, hahahahaha.”

Houki and the others couldn’t stay mad, seeing that rare smile on Laura’s face. She looked just like a normal girl who’d played a joke on her friends.

“Anyway! These, er, EOS. Do you think they’ll be of any use?”

“I was wondering about that, too.”

Cecilia and Houki watched Chifuyu, waiting for her answer.

“There aren’t that many IS out there. I think they’ll be significant in rescue operations.” In terms of raw capability, a thousand EOSes couldn’t match up to a single IS. Chifuyu found it better to just not mention that. After all, the official line was that they ‘weren’t designed for combat with IS.’

Seriously. How desperate are they, that they had to send that kind of thing to IS Academy? She couldn’t understand why the principal went along with it, either. But now wasn’t the time for that. It was something to think about when the time came. Though not, of course, not to prepare for.

As she wandered lost in thought, the students, now all out of their EOSes, gathered around her, asking for orders with their gazes.

“Ah, right. Bring them to the second hangar. Use the jacks they came in on. Dismissed.”

As Chifuyu clapped, the students got to work. Maya had loaded the EOSes on the jacks using her IS, but moving them was to be done by raw brute force, and Ling let out a quiet whine as she realized what was happening. The process took the rest of the scheduled practice time.

“Seriously, though.” The girls’ shower room was crowded after IS practice. Ling’s voice rose through the steam. “Didn’t that take a toll on everyone’s IS?”

“Indeed it did— Come on, Ling! Don’t just wander off with my shampoo!”

“What’s wrong with that? You’re rich, you can afford to buy another.”

“I-I don’t mind if you take it, just tell me!”

“Yeah, that expensive shampoo’s some good stuff.”

“Are you even listening?!”

Regardless of the shampoo, Ling’s observation seemed to have caught the attention of all of the cadets.

“Seems like it. I heard some of the second and third years had to send their IS back to their home country for repair.”

“Y-Yeah... I heard that too... My sister’s having hers repaired here, though,” Kanzashi chimed in after Laura.

“Tatenashi’s is Russian, right?”

“Can’t she use other countries’ equipment because of technology sharing, though?”

Charlotte and Houki had their own questions, and Kanzashi filled them in as well, “Some of the technology is Japanese, and I think there was an Italian engineer involved too...”

“Italian? Wait, Tempesta’s—” Cecilia’s expression was serious as she probed Kanzashi about a potential rival in the selection process for the EU’s next frontline IS.

“Hmm. A successor to the Tempesta. Now I’m curious.”

Chifuyu’s opponent in the championship match of the first Mondo Grosso tournament, and in the scheduled championship match of the second tournament which she forfeited, was Italy’s Tempesta. One of the few IS with a one-off ability, it was widely recognized as #2 in the world. Just like Chifuyu’s, it was a pure melee fighter which overwhelmed its foes.

It was powerful enough that its pilot had no hesitation publicly stating that things ‘weren’t settled’ between her and Chifuyu—maybe, that was the only reason she said it. Still, though, she had declined to be crowned Brynhildr at the second Mondo Grosso. Because of this, and the popular understanding that the Brynhildr was the strongest, most people still considered the title to be Chifuyu’s.

“You know. Aren’t the Aqua Machines an application of BT technology?”

Charlotte's casual speculation naturally—inevitably—made Cecilia wince. It seemed like she had had the same thought. "I mean, mind control of fluid energy... They're pretty much the same."

"I... I suppose."

"I'm pretty sure Tatenashi's works better, though."

Thunk. Ling had definitely stumbled upon a way to set Cecilia off. No, had stamped her foot right down in it.

"...Ling."

"Huh, what?"

"I'm never lending you my shampoo again."

"Huh?"

"Or body wash, or conditioner, or facial wash, or hand soap, or lotion, or perfume, or towels, or money! Never again!"

"Whaaaaa? Wait, why? How come?! I need them, though!"

"....."

"Don't ignore me!"

Ling, realizing she was losing a vital, vital lifeline, suddenly stopped joking around and tried to beg her way back into Cecilia's good graces. But Cecilia was the proud scion of an empire upon which the sun never set. Once her mind was set on a decision, it wouldn't be easily changed.

Ignoring Ling's panic, Laura rinsed her hair and put her eyepatch back on before saying, "By the way, I've received orders to return home. I'll likely be leaving for Germany soon."

"Really? You'll have to pick up some souvenirs for your squad, then."

"Yeah. Everyone from the Schwarze Hase has been telling me what they want."

"Like what?" For once, Houki took an interest in Laura's conversation. Probably out of pride that her squad was so interested in Japan.

“Matcha, yatsushashi, Imagawa cakes, konpeito. Then taiyaki, monaka, manju buns, uiro, senbei biscuits, warabi-mochi, dango, mizuame...”

As they watched Laura count on her fingers, Charl and Houki wore awkward grins.

“They’re all sweets...”

“I guess even if they’re a spec ops squad, they’re still girls...”

“Oh, and the most important part, the thing Klarissa asked for!”

“W-What?”

“A shachihoko.”

“Whaa.....?” Their jaws dropped.

Meanwhile, Laura, with a serious look on her face, repeated herself, “A shachihoko. What, don’t you know what that is? It’s supposed to be the image of an ancient guardian deity. With it, you can put up an impregnable defense. It was vital in the protection of the old castles.”

Wasn’t that just because they were supposed to prevent fires?

I think her second-in-command is deeply confused about something...

“Do you know where I can buy one?”

“I, umm. Laura. I don’t think they sell those.”

“I see. So I should take one by force?”

“Where’d that come from?!”

“I read a manga about something like that.”

“Just because you read it doesn’t mean you should do it!” Charlotte seemed to know which one. Or at least have enough of an idea to know that she should shut that line of thought down, fast.

For the rest of the shower, Charlotte and Houki tried their hardest to convince Laura that she had the wrong idea. On Laura’s part, she had little to say but a surprised expression, nods, and a repeated ‘I see.’

“Cecilia! Don’t you see how sorry I am?!”

“I most certainly do not see anyone here being properly apologetic!”

Houki, Charlotte, Laura, and Kanzashi put on their underwear as Ling continued to entreat Cecilia even in the locker room. The scene, vivid beyond color, was one only possible among teenagers. To put it into words—yes, it was simply indescribable with words.



“Um...”

In a research laboratory, set far away from the urban hustle and bustle of IS Academy. It had taken me an hour on light rail, another hour on the bus, and I was beyond deep in the mountains.

“Is this the place?”

I looked down at my map, then up at the sign again.

“Kuramochi Engineering. It definitely should be.”

Yeah. I’d made my way to where Byakushiki was created. Today was a weekday, and normally I’d be in class, but today I had special permission to leave campus.

A full overhaul of Byakushiki, huh. I wonder what they’re gonna have to do. As I wondered to myself, I made my way to the gatehouse punctuating the white wall around the complex. But there was no doorbell, no intercom, just a blank door.

“How am I supposed to get in here...”

Grope, grope.

“Whoa!”

Feeling someone grope my butt, I spun around wildly. As I tried to keep my balance, I saw a woman in blacked-out swim goggles, right on the border between creepy and alluring.

“Wh-What are you—”

“Ufufu. You’ve got a nice, tight butt.” Her grin arced like a crescent moon. From it, long fangs poked out, almost like Dracula in the movies.

“Who the hell are you?!”

“Who do I look like?”

She was wearing what looked like a school swimsuit—no, a navy blue IS suit. Plastered across the expanse of cloth that could barely hold her huge breasts in was a name tag reading ‘Kagaribi.’ And she was drenched. Not just that. She had a harpoon in her right hand, and a still-writhing clump of five or six trout in her left. The water was still dripping off of her onto the asphalt. Her curly hair was soaking wet, too, and hung off her like sheets of seaweed.



A weirdo... is what she looks like. Some kind of pervert. I did my best to keep my distance, but this pervert got right up in my face.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Um...”

“Hmm. Mm?”

“.....”

Just as what was going on started to overwhelm me, the door behind me opened.

“Boss! What’re you doing?” It was a man that looked to be in his thirties, and when he saw me, he went, “Oh! Orimura, is that you? Orimura Ichika?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I see! I’m so sorry about that. She’d told me she was going out to meet you, but, ah, as you can see, she’s a bit of a creep.” He was brutally honest. I’ll give him that.

“Shut your mouth before he smells the Fixodent, gramps,” she retorted as she flung her harpoon. Whoa! What kind of nutjob was I dealing with?! “Anyway, you little cutie. Why don’t you come to my room and we have some fun?”

“Uh... What kind of fun?”

Watching her boobs jiggle was captivating enough that I was having a hard time arguing.

“Well, we could play Old Maid.”

“Isn’t that kinda boring with just two people?”

“Yeah, I guess it would be. So why don’t we just fuck instead?”

“.....” The man and I had matching stares of disapproval.

“Tch. My shower’s the perfect size for two, so why does it have to be illegal?!” She pursed her lips as she crossed her arms behind her head.

I wasn’t quite sure what to say, but his whisper cut through my confusion, “I’m terribly sorry about all of this. Will you come inside? I’ll get you a drink.”

With another apology, he led me inside. The walls were painted a bright white. So was the ceiling. And the lights were, you guessed it, shining pale fluorescents. *Are they that proud of making Byakushiki...? Nahhhhh.*

Splish, splash, sploosh. The damp squishing sounds as she walked behind me made me feel kind of like I was in a horror movie.

“C’mon, boss! Dry off before you come in!”

“Mwahahaha, it’s no big deal.”

“I’m going to have to mop up!”

“I guess you are. Okay, I’ll stay out here until I’m dry.”

“That’s going to take forever!”

“Ahahaha.”

Dealing with her every day must be exhausting.

“Anyway, uh. See you later, I guess,” I muttered.

“Sure thing, sweetcakes. I’m looking forward to it.” As the ‘boss’ waved goodbye, I set off down the hallway.



“Ufufu. He really is Orimura’s little brother, isn’t he.”

The woman smiled to herself after Ichika’s departure. Her fangy grin was enough to give anyone watching goosebumps.

“Boss! Hurry up and dry yourself off!”

“Sure, sure. Sorry.” She traded her harpoon and fish for a towel, and scrubbed her hair dry. “I can’t wait to see what kind of data I get out of you, Orimura Ichika.”

The boss’s subtle grin peeked out from under the towel as she dried herself off.



Hmm... I’d spent around half an hour waiting in the room I was led to. I had just gotten sick of the wait and stood up to do some pushups when the woman

from before walked into the room.

“Sorry about that! I didn’t keep you waiting too long, did I?”

“Ah, it wasn’t that bad.”

“.....”

“.....?”

She puffed out her cheeks, as if irritated with my response, and said, “Boy, when a lady asks whether she’s kept you waiting, you tell her you didn’t even notice.”

“Ahh... Okay...”

“If you don’t have any grace, you’re never going to catch a girl.”

“I-I see...”

“But don’t worry. I’ll always be here for you.”

I, uh. I should probably just pretend she didn’t actually say that.

“Anyway, let’s get started!” She was wearing a lab coat over her IS suit. On her feet were fuzzy cat’s-paw slippers. And her goggles were pushed up, so I could finally see her eyes. “Let me introduce myself. I’m Kagaribi Hikaruno, chief engineer of the second Kuramochi Engineering Laboratory, and a classmate of your sister.”

A smile rose to her feline eyes. But the fangs protruding from her grin were definitely canines.

“My sister... You mean Chifuyu?”

“Yep.”

She snapped the elastic band of her goggles as she pushed them up to the top of her head, making them look almost like a hairband. *Wait, I have better things to think about!*

“By classmate, you mean in high school?”

“Yep.”

“So you’re a friend of Tabane’s too?”

“Nooo, no no no.” She turned aside. “A ‘friend’ is someone you can approach on an equal footing. And no one out there is quite on their level. What Orimura Chifuyu can be to Shinonono Tabane, and what Shinonono Tabane can be to Orimura Chifuyu, is something no one else can come close to.”

She waved her finger as she spoke and continued, “Someone like me can’t even come close. So I can’t say they’re my friends. Classmates, yes. But just classmates.”

Changing the topic, she opened up a projection display and brought forth an IS maintenance machine. Its six arms grasped at me.

“Open up Byakushiki for me. I’m going to get started on repair, optimization, and data collection.”

“Okay.”

I focused and called forth Byakushiki. My body shined before being enveloped in pure white armor.

“Sorry about this summer. It’s just... I had so much to take care of that I couldn’t make it to IS Academy. No sooner did I take care of one mess, another one popped up. I was in such a pickle.”

“.....?”

“Man, it sucks getting old...”

I didn’t really understand what she meant, but I couldn’t argue. Hikaruno sighed and looked back at her display.

“Hmm, hmm. That’s some pretty serious damage. Why don’t you step out of Byakushiki and I’ll send it to the techs?”

“Uhh... How long is it going to take?”

“Hm? It should be ready by tomorrow. We’ll just have to pull an all-nighter, it’ll be easy.” That didn’t sound all that easy. “Anyway, let me introduce you to the staff of Kuramochi Engineering!”

A door slid open, and a line of men and women rushed in. They were of varying ages, but it seemed like they were all Japanese.

“Why don’t you go fishing or something to pass the time? They’re biting in the river nearby.” She handed me a bamboo rod. It had no lure attached, just a line dangling from the end. “You’ll have to find your own bait, though.”

“Ooookay. I’ll go do that, then.”

“Have fun!” Hikaruno saw me off with a wave as I left the lab.



“Fishing, huh.”

I hadn’t done that in forever. It used to be a hobby of mine in elementary school, though. First with Chifuyu, then with Houki, then with Rin. *But I got so busy in middle school that I didn’t have time.*

I followed the path into the hills, and soon enough I could hear the river’s flow.

“Here we go.”

I found myself a place with a bunch of rocks overlooking a spot where the river, glistening in the sunlight, widened. *Seems like the fishing’ll be good here.* I decided to get started looking for bait and lifted up a rock on the shore looking for bugs. There was nothing wrong with worms, either, but I preferred bugs. Or more, I figured the fish did. *Now that I think back on it, Rin hated having to do this.*

“So, what are we using for bait?”

“Huh? Oh, these.”

“Eeek!”

“Jeez, quiet down.”

“But that’s a, a b-b-bug!”

“Yep.”

“I can’t believe you. You Japanese are so weird.”

“Huh? Don’t the Chinese eat fried centipedes?”

“Only people, like, out in the middle of nowhere! Who on earth would eat that if they didn’t have to?!”

“Oh really.”

“Yeah really!”

“But isn’t the saying that the Chinese will eat anything with legs except for a chair?”

“Why do you think that?!”

“Oh, sorry. I guess chairs too.”

“.....”

She punched me then. Not just a slap, a full-on punch. Chinese people are scary. *But she still kept coming fishing with me. I miss those days.* I kept up my hunt as I reflected, and soon enough, I had all the bait I’d need.

“All right, that should be enough.”

I perched atop the largest rock, and setting a bug on my hook, cast it into the water. All there was now was to wait for a bite.

This is so relaxing... Fishing is great. Out away from all the worries in the world, at a quiet place in the hills. Just a peaceful spot where the sounds of the wind and water gave you room to set your mind free. That’s what fishing meant to me. It’s nice to catch fish, I used to get really excited about the idea, but now it was more just a bonus. *You know, I should let out everything I can’t say normally.*

“Going to IS Academy is a real pain in the ass...”

It was okay. No one was around to hear me.

“What, don’t you like being around all those girls?”

My heart skipped a beat and I turned to look for the source of the voice.

“Whoa?! What are you doing here, Hikaruno?”

“I don’t have anything else to do. My specialty is IS software.” Hikaruno

hopped up on top of the rock and sat down next to me. Her breasts bounced up and down as she did, and I turned so as not to stare. “Gimme some bait?”

“Here you go. I’m using bugs, though.”

“That’s fine, I like those better anyway. But it’s good to have dough balls or berries around for if you run into any girls.”

She snapped up a bug, and set it on her own hook. *Yeah, if I did that, Rin wouldn’t have hit me. That makes sense, though.* Hikaruno’s pole, like mine, was bamboo. It was about the same length, and our lines drooped into the water side-by-side.

“Anyway, Orimura Ichika. How much do you know about IS software?”

“Me? Um... It’s set up on the core, and uses the ‘unlimited circuit’ to self-evolve. It has its own tendencies and preferences.”

“Yeah. That’s a good answer. But, you know, there’s one other feature of the unlimited circuit. It operates at hypervisor level on the core network. So when it gets out onto standard networks, it’s extremely good for hacking.”

“I see.”

“Question, then. What’s the core network?”

“Um... A virtual world protocol designed to connect IS during their intended use of space exploration?”

“Pretty much. I see you’ve done your homework. That’s too bad, I like bad boys.”

“...Why?”

“Anyway, did you know that it also has a data backup capability over the core network?”

“Huh?”

“Looks like you didn’t. Like, for example. Your own Byakushiki inherited the one-off ability of Orimura Chifuyu’s Kurezakura, as well as some of the capabilities of the first Infinite Stratos, Shirokishi.”

“Right...”

I glanced over at Hikaruno, and saw her grinning again. This time was different than before, though. It was like a predator's, about to strike.

"Looks like you've got a bite, Ichika."

"Ah!" My grip tensed around my rod. A fat fish flopped out of the water at the end of my line.

"That's a big one."

"Thanks."

It had been a long time, but the feeling of a good catch was still exhilarating. I put it into my basket, and set another bug on my hook, then cast again.

"Anyway, really. The most fun I have at work is convincing an IS to do something it doesn't want to."

"Convincing?"

"Yeah. Like, training an IS that hates ranged weapons how to shoot. It's almost like convincing them. Like breaking a horse in," Hikaruno said as she hauled in her line. "Aww, it got away."

"Was it a big one?"

"Nah, it felt pretty small."

Sighing, she reset her bait and cast again. Never mind the size of the fish, the size of her boobs was at least comparable to Ms. Yamada's. I nervously swallowed. *Ugh, no, I can't*— I swiftly looked away.

"Ahahahaha." I could hear Hikaruno's laugh from beside me.



"Phew. I don't feel like doing anything today."

Ling walked through the halls with her arms crossed behind her head, a juice box dangling from her mouth by its straw.

"Hahaha. Is it because Ichika isn't here?"

Prodding her from the side was Charlotte. Ling almost dropped her juice as she sputtered out a response.

“What?! No way! Hmph! Who cares if he’s hanging around, anyway!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

They didn’t spend very much time together, but today, there was a joint lecture and they’d been assigned to put away the materials. Stopping along the way to buy a juice was definitely Ling’s idea.

“I feel almost naked without having my IS. It’s in personal lock mode, so it can’t be stolen and couldn’t be used if it was, but still.”

Ling looked at Shenlong, in standby on her arm. Normally, it took the form of a ring bracelet, but in personal lock it was a thin band, like a temporary tattoo at first glance.

“The problem is how long it would take to get ready in an emergency.”

“I know, but we’re stuck with it. It’s like disassembling a gun for storage.”

“Mmm. I guess our training will be enough to keep ourselves safe while it lasts. It’s not like we can’t use them anyway, it’ll just take a little bit longer.”

“Yeah. And that’s why they have us on the buddy system, too.”

“The only one left on her own here is Tatenashi, right?”

“Yeah. And Ichika. I think we’ll be fine, though.”

“...I still wish he’d hurry up and get back.” Ling covered her mouth as she realized she’d said that out loud. But Charlotte just smiled, pretending she hadn’t heard it. “I-I didn’t mean it that way! Just, he hasn’t had military training or anything, so...”

“Yeah. You’re worried about him, aren’t you?”

“Wait, no, that’s not—”

Ling was halfway through a panicked response when the lights went out. Not just in the hallway. The classrooms and signage were dark too. Only the midday sun shining through the windows pierced the darkness. Just as they realized what was happening—

“Wait, why are the defensive shutters closing?!”

Armor plate slid shut diagonally over the windows, and as they sealed shut,

the inside of the school descended into a haze of darkness and panicked exclamations.

“One, two... Charlotte.”

“Yeah. I know. We haven’t switched over to generators, and the emergency lights haven’t come on. Something’s wrong.”

They each started up their IS in low-power mode, and opened a status window, simultaneously switching into night-vision mode driven by sonar, thermal sensors, gravitational sensors, and radar.

“Hey, it’s Laura. Charlotte, are you okay?”

“Where are you, Ling?”

Laura and Cecilia’s voices came over private channels. As Ling and Cecilia replied, another voice broke in, “All cadets, report to the basement operations room. I’m marking it on your maps. If any shutters block your path, you’re authorized to destroy them.”

It was Chifuyu’s voice, quiet but forceful. They could tell that another battle was about to unfold at IS Academy.

Chapter II: Brynhildr

“Let me explain the situation.”

The scene was the operations room in the hidden complex below IS Academy. Originally, it was meant to be kept a secret from the students, with no exceptions made—but now, every student with their own IS was there. Houki, Cecilia, Ling, Charlotte, Laura, Kanzashi, and Tatenashi stood in a line. Before them were Chifuyu and Maya. The operations room must have had its own independent power supply, as its displays were still lit up. But rather than modern holo-projection displays, they were older screens.

“You know, I’m surprised there’s this kind of thing down here.”

“Yes. It’s truly a shock.”

Ling and Cecilia whispered to each other as they looked around the room, but they weren’t able to avoid Chifuyu’s notice for even a moment.

“Huang! Alcott! Quiet down, we’re trying to brief you!”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“My apologies!”

Chifuyu’s shout cut off their whispered conversation, and Maya zoomed in on a portion of the display to begin her briefing, “All IS Academy systems are currently down. We’re under some kind of electronic attack... That is, we’ve determined that it’s a hacking attempt.”

Maya’s voice had a rare hardness. Whatever was going on must have been serious, or students would never have been allowed down here.

“So far, there’s been no harm to students. The armored shutters have been closed as a precaution, but as of now they’ve been unnecessary. Of course, not all of them—some have been left open. So at least people can go pee if they have to.” The joke fell flat. “Any questions about the situation?”

“Yes.” Laura raised her hand. The active-duty pilot was, as usual, the first to

take action. “I’d heard IS Academy’s systems were all developed from the ground up.”

“Well...” Maya started as she looked around the room nervously.

Noticing this, Chifuyu answered instead, “That’s not the problem right now. The problem is that it’s happening.”

“What are they after?”

“If we knew, this would be a lot easier.”

That was the end of Laura’s questions. No one else raised their hand, and Maya moved on to explaining their mission, “Shinonono, Alcott, Huang, Dunois, Bodewig. You’re to enter the access room and execute a cyber-dive into the IS core network. Sarashiki Kanzashi, you’re to back them up.”

Maya’s instructions were clear and direct, but were met with only silence from her students.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” Maya was nonplussed by the shocked reaction of everyone but Tatenashi.

“Cyber-dive?!”

“Yes. You remember how, in class, we covered how it was theoretically possible for an IS pilot to virtually enter cyberspace by means of their neural bypass? That wasn’t just a theory. Doing so is banned under the terms of the Alaska Treaty, but the current situation falls under the exceptions laid out in Article 4.”

“That wasn’t what I was confused about!” Rin’s fists shook at her side.

“Indeed! This... This ‘cyber-dive’ is...” Cecilia trailed off in confusion, and Charlotte took over. “So we’ll be using our IS synchronization and nanomachine signaling to enter cyberspace...”

“It’s not dangerous in itself. It just doesn’t seem useful. Normally you’d be better off just getting directly at the software, or at the computer itself.”

Laura’s reassuring explanation was met with an objection from Kanzashi, “But when you’re in cyberspace, won’t you be completely defenseless? I’m worried about if anything happens.”

Finally, Houki summed up their worries and piped up asking, “Isn’t it too dangerous to gather all the pilots in one place?”

Chifuyu, having considered these worries, rejected them in response, “No. This operation requires entry into cyberspace to repel the attackers. No objections. If you have a problem, leave!”

She was forceful enough to cow the students.

“I mean, I wasn’t that mad about it.”

“It was just a bit of a shock.”

“We can do it. Right, Laura?”

“Yeah. We can.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“We’ll show you we can do it.”

With everyone in agreement, Chifuyu clapped her hands together to break up the meeting, “All right! Get to the access room, and get started! Dismissed!”

Spurred on, Houki and the others filed out. With that, only Chifuyu and Maya were left in the room. Chifuyu, Maya, and Tatenashi.

“I have separate orders for you.”

“Which are?” Tatenashi’s usual playfulness was gone.

“With the Academy’s systems down, I’m expecting visitors.”

“Unwanted ones?”

Chifuyu had gleaned that, in their current situation, a third force may try to take advantage.

“That’s right. And the others won’t be able to fight. So sorry, but I’m putting it all on you.”

“Mission accepted.”

“It’ll be a hard fight.”

“But I *am* the student council president.” Her cheeky grin did nothing to cut through Chifuyu’s stoniness.

“Your IS took more than a few scratches in that last battle, though. Isn’t it still being repaired?”

“Yes. But I’m Sarashiki Tatenashi. I know how to fight from a disadvantage.”

The student council president wouldn’t yield an inch. Seeing the determination in her eyes, Chifuyu sighed, then fixed her with a stern stare and said, “It’s all up to you.”

Tatenashi bowed in acknowledgment and left. As the door slid shut behind her, Chifuyu and Maya spoke regretfully.

“What are we doing? We’re supposed to be protecting our students, not sending them out to fight.”

“Ms. Orimura...”

She wanted to say ‘we have no choice’ but she couldn’t. There was no excuse for putting children on the battlefield. Both of them knew it, in the depths of their hearts.

“There’s no time to sit around. We have our own jobs to do.”

“Yes!”

Chifuyu and Maya began their own preparations.



Chifuyu, wearing a black bodysuit like a ninja’s, looked up as she pulled the straps on her cavalry boots tight. Before her hung six sheathed IS blades, each filed down to the narrower profile of a katana. Sliding them into the holsters at her hips, she took on the appearance of a strange modern samurai.

“I haven’t had my hair up like this in a long time.”

She pulled it into a ponytail and tied it off with a braided cord, then picked up two more katana.



“Let’s go.”

The door slid open. Striding into the darkness, she was lit only by the emergency lights in the floor. Her face, reflected in her steel, showed a smile.



“All right, then.” Tatenashi slipped through the hole she’d blown in a defensive shutter, making a light landing. “Evacuation is almost complete. So it’s okay to come out now.”

She snapped her fan open, revealing the word ‘welcome.’ But the greetings would be delivered not with a smile but with an iron fist.

[Intruder alert! Intruder alert!]

An alarm rang out from Tatenashi’s phone. Opening it up, she looked at the screen. A separate array of cameras not on the Academy network—that is, unauthorized cameras—showed her enemy. She couldn’t tell, under their camouflage which looked like bundles of autumn leaves, whether they were men or women, but there were six of them. At first glance, the camo looked almost like ghillie suits, but it was far more advanced.

“Those must be the new stealth suits that capture their surroundings on one side and then display it on the other.” The ‘leaves’ were flexible pieces of treated film which, when switched on, wrapped around their wearer. By displaying their surroundings, they made the wearer seem transparent.

Our systems haven’t been down for long, either. And they already got a special ops team with the latest gear here? Something smells fishy. It did have to be a separate faction, though. If it was the same one behind the hacking, it would have been more effective to begin the assault at the same time as the power went out. *They must have us under observation. How... Crude.*

It may have been IS Academy, but it was also a school for young girls just on the cusp of blossoming. *Do they have us under 24-hour observation? Where’s their sense of mystery, of romance?*

“Oh?”

The hallway stretched out into the distance. Unblocked. Silently. **But**

something was there.

“Why, to think that I’d already meet you here. I truly am blessed.”

Pssht. Pssht. Alloy bullets shot forth from silenced pistols, only to stop hanging in the air in front of Tatenashi.

“.....?!”

“Mmhm. That’s just my Active Inertial Canceler.”

Really, the IS Mysterious Lady had already begun to scatter its aqua nanomachines. They may not have been able to block IS weapons, but small arms fire was another story. Tatenashi grinned at her unseen foes’ sudden hesitation.

While under normal circumstances she wasn’t able to sense them directly, but with the aqua nanomachines, it was easy. Even invisible and soundless, they still took up space in the hallway. And where the nanomachines *weren’t*... Then —

“Click.”

Tatenashi mimed pressing a button. A moment later, an explosion tore through the hall.

“That was one of Mysterious Lady’s little tricks. Did you enjoy ‘Clear Passion’?”

Indoors combat was Mysterious Lady’s specialty. It was an IS built around spreading and controlling nanomachines. Meanwhile, no matter how well-trained and well-armed her foes were, they were only human. Even an IS which couldn’t fully deploy was still an impossible foe.

“I feel like I’m bullying you,” Tatenashi sighed, but then chuckled. “And honestly, I enjoy it.”

She gave her best impish grin. Still, though, she was fighting against a raid targeted mostly at unarmed schoolgirls. Her cause was just.

“All right, here it comes. Let’s go! Tatenashi Five!” As Tatenashi spoke, she split into five. Five Sarashiki Tatenashis, all lined up in a school uniform but holding a lance. “Well, really, it’s all Mysterious Lady, but whatevs.”

Really, they were phantoms of the mist, formed of aqua nanomachines and projected by nanomachine lenses. The problem was picking out the real one. And even if most of them were mist, they could still—

“Boom!”

They could still explode. Yet bullets would do nothing to them.

“Captain! We can’t take much more—”

“Whooooa!”

Man after man, the elite of the elite, fell before her. Another squad showed up to reinforce them, but it made no difference.

“Fall back! Fall back!”

She was just 16. Her IS, and she herself, were in no condition to fight. Yet still, the battle went her way. It was a reminder of how the development of the IS rewrote every rule of war.

Tatenashi grinned, giggling, amidst the fire and the flames, looking every inch the villain.



A woman advanced through the darkened passages as she listened to the explosions from above. This infiltrator of IS Academy’s secret subterranean complex was the leader of the American special operations force ‘Unnamed.’ She was equipped with an experimental stealth version of the IS Fang Quake. This model had several subtle differences from Iris’s assault type. To begin with, its custom paint, rather than flashy tiger stripes, was the deep blue preferred by the Navy SEALs. Completely undecorated, without even unit insignia.

But that was a given. The ‘Unnamed’ had no nationality, no race, no faith, no name. They truly lived up to their one name. There was no official record of their service or association with the American military, either. Such a unit would have, as a matter of course, no insignia.

This woman, too, had no name. Only the title of ‘squad leader’ for communication. The cruelty of her training had driven what name she might have had from her mind. Now, she was a nobody. An unnamed leader for an

unnamed squad. This was her world.

Without a word, she advanced. Her objective, the unregistered cores stored at IS Academy after the previous battle. With those, the US wouldn't just gain access to more IS. It would gain access to highly-effective drones. This was even more important than increasing the number of IS available. **Yes. With this technology, the plan would be complete.**

And with that, we could redraw the map of the world... She didn't know the details. She didn't care. All that mattered to her was her mission.

".....?"

The Fang Quake's forward floating drift stopped. Its sensors picked out a human form in the unlit hallway.

"En garde!"

".....?!"

Two words, then a sudden assault. With the sudden ring and spark of blade on scabbard-mouth, a shadow leapt toward her back. Suddenly, the passage lit up like the light of day.



“Brynhildr...” the squad leader gasped in surprise.

A woman stood tall in the light in front of her. It was Chifuyu, in her jet-black bodysuit. From her hips hung six sheathed katana, three on each side. In her hands were another two. Those were the blades which had struck at the Fang Quake.

Is she serious? That was the first thought which leapt to the squad leader’s mind. No matter how many times she checked her sensor, Chifuyu was wearing no IS, only the bodysuit. Cut like a scuba diver’s, it covered all of her body which was visible, except for the heavy cavalry boots and the martial arts gloves on her hands. Only her face was visible. But still—

How does she think she’s going to put up a fight with just a Kevlar suit? It might be bulletproof against small arms fire, and perhaps even cut-resistant. But in front of an IS’ firepower, she may as well have been naked.

“What’s wrong?”

“.....?”

“Bring it. You’re facing off against the first Brynhildr. The first woman to be recognized as the strongest in the world. Show me what you’ve got, soldier.” Chifuyu smirked. Smirked with supreme self-confidence.



“This must be...”

Houki, Cecilia, Ling, Charlotte, Laura, and Kanzashi filed into the access room. Everything inside was painted a bright, reflective white. To their sides were six reclining chairs, three on each side. It was almost like a hair salon.

“Relax in the chairs. I’ll cover you from the desk.” As Kanzashi spoke, the others laid down in the chairs.

“What is this place, anyway? It’s like something out of a movie.”

“Indeed. I’ve never seen anything like it. How about you, Ling?”

“Mmm. There’s nothing like this in China. And why’s it underground, anyway? This is weird.”

“Yeah. Something’s not quite right. The operations room earlier was pretty heavily fortified, too.”

“Wait, Charlotte. You scanned it with your IS?”

“Yeah. A little bit, at least.” Charl held her finger to her lips.

“I don’t recall any facilities like this in Germany, either. What’s going on at this school? Is it really just a high school?”

The others were silent as they mulled the implications of what Laura had said. It was something they’d all wondered before. ‘IS Academy has too many secrets.’ It was something none of them had said, but all of them had felt.

“I need to get this working...” Kanzashi half-whispered. The others nodded and connected their IS to the terminals in the chairs.

“All right, to connect your IS to the core network, I’m going to need you to set them to software priority.” Kanzashi had already opened her Uchigane Nishiki, called forth a console, and was typing away.

“Ah...” Charlotte spoke up. “I remember reading a book about going into a game world. Is it going to be like that?”

The others were surprised at her palpable excitement.

Clearing her throat, Kanzashi answered, “I mean, it is a virtual world. I’ll be backing you up from out here, so focus on reactivating the core system... I’ll guide you while you’re inside, too.”

“Got it,” Ling answered energetically.

With that, the five laid down and began to focus.

“Here goes!”

Kanzashi activated the system. In the blink of an eye, they passed out as if in comas, their consciousnesses transported to a fantastic world.



“Where am I?”

The first to speak was Cecilia. Before her, grassy moors spread out as far as the eye could see. A gentle breeze tempered the heat of the June sun. Just as

the hum of nature enveloped her, Ling's voice rang out, "Eeek! What the hell is this thing?!"

As she shouted, she clutched at the hem of her dress. It was a vivid blue, with a white pinafore tied over. Just like Alice in Wonderland. Surprised by her sudden shout, the group looked around at each other.

"This is..."

"We're..."

"All wearing the same clothes?"

Their confusion was broken as a window popped open in midair, "This is Kanzashi. How's it going in there?"

"It... It's like a storybook..."

Kanzashi thought for a moment before replying to Charlotte.

"It must be..." They could hear the clatter of her keyboard as she spoke. "I think I understand... The virtual world you're in is being hacked. You're going to need to play out the role you've been assigned."

"Role?!" Ling, speaking for the five, grimaced in astonishment.

"Wait, you mean we have to be Alice?!"

"I'm not sure. The space you're in is very unstable."

"So if we're Alice..." Charlotte glanced over at Laura.

"What is it?"

"I figured if anyone was going to be the rabbit, it would be you."

"Hmph. Don't compare me to a mere pet. We proud Schwarze Hase—"

"Ahh!" A sudden yell from Cecilia interrupted them.

"Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be late!"

Hoppity-hop-hop. The rabbit took a watch from its waistcoat pocket, looked at it, and then hurried on.

"There it is!"

“Catch the rabbit!” The five nodded in unison at Kanzashi’s order.

“Hold it right there! Agh... Dammit! It’s impossible to run in a dress!”

“Ling, you just need to hold up the hem like this—”

“Hmph. I’ll go on ahead, then.”

“Hurry up! It’s almost to the woods!”

Cecilia pointed as the rabbit disappeared amongst the trees without a glance backward. Chasing, the five followed into the dense forest. Tracing a path overhung with foliage, they soon reached a clearing.

“And what’s this?”

Five doors stood in the middle of the woods.

“Are we supposed to go in?”

“I guess so...” Kanzashi hesitantly replied. They could see bursts of static overlaying her face. “Signal—breaking up—going to have—make your way to—yourselves—”

“Roger!”

Nodding, each of the girls opened the door before them and stepped through.



“Mmm...”

Ling waited until the dazzling glare around her faded before opening her eyes. As she took her first step through the door, she had felt her consciousness torn asunder from the world around her as the world faded to white.

“Just where the heck is this, anyway...” She glanced around, a question mark floating over her head. “Wait, am I—”

It was a backdrop she knew well. An atmosphere she’d felt many times: a classroom in the middle school she’d attended with Ichika. The orange haze of sunset filled the room, and far away, she could hear the baseball team practicing.

“But why middle school?” It was only in her confusion that she realized her

clothing had changed. “This is the sailor uniform they had us wear...”

A deep blue, nearly black collar. Wearing it every day, she’d always found it unstylish, but now, it had a pleasant nostalgia.

She quietly paced the room, getting her bearings. It seemed real. As real as could be. The heat, the humidity, even the smell was just like she remembered. But it wasn’t.

She tried to call forth her IS, but she couldn’t find its standby bracelet form on her arm.

“...This must be a trap.”

Realizing it, she decided to make her escape before its author could come calling. Making her way to the door— **Rattle.**

“Huh?”

Before she could grasp the handle, it rolled open in front of her.

“Hey, Rin.”

“I-I-Ichika!”

Before her stood Ichika, in the stiff-collared jacket of a retro school uniform.



Clang! Chifuyu’s blades rained slash after slash on the armor of the Fang Quake, but not one managed to cut through. Four had already dulled to the point of uselessness.

“Hmph.”

Planting another in the floor, she drew forth a replacement from a scabbard at her hip. The shrill grind of the blade as it sprung forth echoed chillingly through the room.

“...Haven’t you taken this far enough?” Squad Leader—to give her the only name she knew—spoke with a steely voice, but behind her ice-cold intonation sparks of frustration were beginning to fly.

“Hmmmm?” Chifuyu tauntingly feigned confusion. “Don’t you have a wedding to bomb or something? What are you doing at a high school on some middle-of-

nowhere island?”

“.....”

“You’re after those drone cores... And something else too, aren’t you. Well, you picked the wrong day. Byakushiki is somewhere safe now.” A whisper of a smile flitted over her face.

Squad Leader gritted her teeth and blurted out, “So you’ve figured it out. Then... Why?”

“Hmph. ‘Why give battle anyway, when there’s no way a human could stand up to an IS?’ you mean?” Chifuyu’s blades whooshed through the air and into a striking stance. “Because I’m no ordinary human.”

In an instant, the katana curved inward. But this time, Squad Leader caught them in her right fist.

“You’re wasting your time!”

“That’s for me to decide.”

Letting her swords go, Chifuyu snaked her arms around her foe’s body. Moving fluidly, she lifted Squad Leader up in a grapple, tensing a wire in her hand.

“Guh!” A choke of surprise escaped Squad Leader’s mouth as the garrote tightened around her neck.

“I thought you’d be smarter than to rely on your IS’ life support like that.”

The wire burned through the energy field, and Chifuyu was already shifting her balance for a spinning kick.

“.....?!”

Chifuyu didn’t even break a sweat as she slammed the IS, and the pilot inside, into the wall.

Squad Leader was beginning to panic. *She’s inhuman. But—*

But what?

It still isn’t enough to even scratch my IS.

That's why she couldn't understand.

Why is she trying to—

Chifuyu, not wanting to give her opponent time to think, unleashed another hail of blades.

"What's wrong, Yankee? Show me what you've got."

"You've got a big mouth, Jap."

Again, sparks flew.



"All right, time to get some data out of Byakushiki. Open it up and stand on the scanner for me."

"Okay."

I nodded at Hikaruno and followed her instructions. A ring of light washed over my IS as the scanning began.

"We'll start with hardware data. Open up the fourth cable port for me?"

"Got it."

I'd learned at least this much helping out like with Kanzashi. As instructed, I opened the port.

"Okay, okay! Here goes!"

She plugged the cable in with a snap. **Zzzap!**

".....!!"

"What's wrong?"

"It felt almost like a shock."

"Huh? That's funny. Hold on, I'll check it out."

"Okay..."

As I wondered what was going on, I suddenly heard Kanzashi's voice inside my head, "*Ichika...*"

"Huh?"

“Mm?” Hikaruno and I looked at each other, both confused.

“Did a private channel just open up?”

“Nope, couldn’t have. You’re in safe mode.”

“That’s weird.” It had felt just like a private channel... At least, I thought so.

“Anyway, let’s tune your thrusters output. Bring them all up to five percent for me?”

“Okay.”

Putting other thoughts aside, I focused on the data collection.



“.....!”

Chifuyu’s last katana bent with a dull cry.

“This is over.” Squad Leader’s movements were swift and precise. She drove a quick left jab into Chifuyu’s gut, and an explosion rang out as Chifuyu was blown backward. “That was...”

Unsure of what she had just felt, Squad Leader looked down at her hand, seeing the last few smoking wisps of cordite. *Dammit*. She realized, now. Chifuyu had gained distance, been protected by active armor, and now, she herself was enveloped in a forest of katana.

With that, Chifuyu spoke a single word, “Shatter.”

The blades exploded at the sound of her voice. The forces of the explosions cracked the floor, crumbled the walls, fractured the ceiling. Chifuyu, chased by flames, raced down the hallway.

“You’re not getting away!”

Chifuyu’s elusiveness had finally broken through Squad Leader’s discipline, and her irritation flared up. Firing up her thrusters, she roared down the hall in pursuit. Aiming at Chifuyu’s back, she unleashed a fierce blow—but Chifuyu, as if she had eyes in the back of her head, nimbly backflipped over it.

“Hmph.”

Planting her foot firmly in Squad Leader's face, Chifuyu used the momentum to turn a corner. She tumbled through a door, then spun to body-check it closed and tumble for cover. *Echolocation shows it as a dead end. Now I've got her!* Squad Leader, her thrusters at full power, chased.

"Bah!" She kicked the door open, but the moment she entered the room, spotlights snapped on.

"Your turn, Maya."

"Roger that!"

Chifuyu pulled the stealth cloaking away. Under it was a Rafale Revive equipped with four gigantic Gatling guns.

T-The Quad Phalanx?! No longer a mobile weapon, between its weight and the anti-recoil stabilizers, but a turret of incomparable firepower. By the time her stomach turned, it was too late.

BBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBRT!! A hail of cannonfire rained down upon her. Gunsmoke welled up like a devilish jack-in-the-box. Behind Maya's IS, Chifuyu nonchalantly watched while sipping a mug of coffee.

"Yeah... You make the best coffee, Ms. Yamada."

"Oh, that? It's just instant."

"....."

A minute later, Squad Leader, bruised and bloodied, was tied up by Maya and Chifuyu. The last few drops of her coffee had a salty, metallic tang.



"Well, that's that."

Tatenashi, having finished tying up the men of the special ops squad with Kevlar rope, let out a sigh. *They're obviously American. No one else would be here after the drones so quickly.*

The problem was, how did they knock out the school's systems? If they stayed down too long, she'd have to break each classroom's shutters open herself for circulation. *And vandalism like that? From the student council president, even?*

Ah well, no sense crying over spilled milk.

“Let’s go.”

Tatenashi switched her IS into standby mode to save energy and took a step forward. As she did, a shot from a silenced gun tore through her belly.

“Huh?” She coughed up a bit of blood, and, still bewildered, tumbled forward.

“You finally let your guard down.”

Dammit! I was too careless! The tied-up men slouched their ropes off. They must have cut themselves loose with hidden plasma cutters. Now, their arms and legs were unbound.

“What do we do with her?”

“She’s the Russian pilot. Japanese by birth, but it looks like she’ll give anyone a turn if it lets her get her hands on an IS.”

“And...?”

“Stop her bleeding and give her a shot of morphine to keep her quiet. We’re taking her and her IS back with us.”

“Roger.”

The men set to work as ordered, their first step gagging her to keep her from biting through her tongue.

“Mmph!”

“Keep it quiet, or you’re gonna bleed out.”

Her stomach ached as if it was being torn apart, but soon, the shot of morphine to her neck pulled her consciousness away.

“I... chi... ka...”

Without thinking, she called out his name before losing consciousness.

Chapter III: World Purge

“Ichika...?”

A classroom, in the light of sunset. The faraway sounds of the baseball team. I was alone here with Ichika.

“What’s up, Rin?”

Something tugged at my thoughts.

“Umm...”

There was something I was forgetting, but I couldn’t put my finger on what.

“C’mon, how often do we get to be alone together?”

“Y-Yeah...”

A classroom, in the light of sunset. Me in my sailor uniform, Ichika in his collared jacket. *I get so nervous when we’re together like this...* Even though we’re going out. Going out? Yeah. With who? My dear, dear Ichika! *That’s it. That’s what I was forgetting.* I laughed to play it off, and sat down on my desk.

Badum, badum. Jeez... *My heart feels like it’s gonna jump out of my chest...*

“Rin.”

“W-What?” My voice wavered. Ugh, I sounded so lame.

“Can I sit down next to you?”

“Y-Yeah...” I nodded twice. Ichika, smiling, sat down next to me.

The room was silent. But inside, my emotions were anything but. *Omigawd, what do I do... We’re rubbing up against each other...* I could feel the warmth of Ichika’s body. I let myself sway back and forth, straining to hear the sound of his heart beating.

“Rin.”

“W-What?”

He whispered in my ear. The sensation of his breath on my earlobes made my heart pound even harder, “Can I come over to your house today?”

“Ah...?”

I thought back to three days before.

“My parents are going out of town in a couple days. I’m gonna have to cook for myself, this suuuuucks.”

“Huh.”

It was just idle chatter to pass the time, but thinking back on it... *I... I was asking him over, wasn’t I...* I must have been. So obviously even Ichika could figure it out. I shouted inside my heart. My face was red all the way up to my ears, and I couldn’t look straight at him.

“So, can I?”

“Yeah...” I nodded, swallowing nervously.

[WORLD PURGE COMPLETE.]

Somewhere in the back of my head, I thought I heard those words. But I had more important things on my mind. *How am I going to sneak off and change my panties first?* That was all I could think of.



In the laboratory, Ichika had finished the first scanning pass and was sitting in a chair with Byakushiki still open.

“We’re almost finished. Here, have a coffee.”

“Oh, thanks.” He accepted the cup from Hikaruno, and took a sip. It was dark, bitter, like growing up.

Ichika.

“Ah...”

He had definitely heard that. He was sure of it, and he threw his coffee to the side while climbing into Byakushiki.

“Hey, wait, Orimura?!”

“Sorry! I’ve got to get back to the Academy, right away!”

“Aww, but how could I ever let you go?”

“I’m gonna blow the wall!”

“Whoa!”

Ichika deployed his particle cannon and, true to his words, fired, knocking out the wall of the lab.

“See you!”

Firing Ignition Boost, he flew through the hole. In just a moment, he had shrunk to a dot on the horizon.

“Jeez, he’s a real hothead,” Hikaruno whispered to herself, coughing from the cloud of dust. “I guess he really is still just a kid.”

She shook her head while sighing, but an impish smile rose to her face.

“It’s okay, Orimura Ichika. I’ve got all the data I need.” She smirked while looking out at the open sky. “With this, I can start planning the next-generation mass-produced IS...”



Firing Ignition Boost on cooldown, it didn’t even take me 30 minutes to make it back to the Academy. *I can hear it. Someone’s calling out to me!* Someone needed me. And I needed to be by their side. Because I’m Orimura Ichika.

“.....?!” A blip came up on Byakushiki’s sensors. “That’s—”

Men in black tactical gear were carrying Tatenashi through the covered passage between buildings on campus.

“Let her...”

I focused my thoughts intently. *Ignition Boost.*

“LET HER GO!”

As I slammed into them, I swept the men’s legs out from under them while grabbing a hold of Tatenashi. As I did, I fired my particle cannon into the ground

to raise a cloud of dust for cover.

“Graaaah!” A single sweeping kick slammed all six into a wall.

“Tatenashi! Tatenashi?!” I screamed out her name. My sensors still showed signs of life, but she didn’t open her eyes. “Tatenashi!”

As I shouted her name one more time, her eyelids opened.

“Mmm... I-Ichika?” She must have been drugged. Her eyes were clouded, like I was carrying Sleeping Beauty.

“Are you okay? Let me get you to the hospital!”

“Mmm... Underground... Go here... Ms. Orimura... Is waiting...”

“Got it!” I raced through the halls toward the waypoint she sent at full speed. “Tatenashi, you’re bleeding! Were you shot?!”

“I’m fine...”

She smiled, trying to laugh it off, but there was none of her usual calmness on her face. *Shit! What the hell is going on here?!* I blew through armored shutters with my particle cannon, taking the shortest possible path to Chifuyu.

“Here?!” I tapped out an access code on a panel to open a door, and saw inside Chifuyu and Ms. Yamada standing over a bound woman I didn’t recognize. “Whaaa? What’s going—”

“I’ll explain later! Orimura, you need to go help Shinonono and the others!”

“Eh?!”

“Here’s the waypoint. Hurry!”

“O-Okay!”

Leaving Tatenashi to Ms. Yamada, I raced off as quickly as I’d arrived. *What’s going on?!* Arriving at the designated room, I released my IS and stepped inside. In the bright white room, Houki and the others slept while Kanzashi paced nervously.

“Ah... Ichika?”

“Kanzashi? What’s going on?”

“Umm...”

She normally had such a hard time putting things into words, it must have been near-impossible for her now. Just as I realized it, a text arrived.

[Orimura — IS Academy has been neutralized by an unknown force. Shinonono and the others entered cyberspace to wrestle back control, but due to the attacks, I was unable to maintain contact with them. At this rate, they’re unlikely to regain consciousness. You need to dive into the IS core network yourself as well, and save them. We’re counting on you. —Sarashiki Kanzashi]

All right. Understood. I mean, I didn’t understand a word of it, but! Understood!

“So, how do I dive into cyberspace?”

Silently, Kanzashi raised a stun gun. What was she...

“Hey, wait, Kanza—”

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt!

“—shiiiiiiiiiii?!” An incredible jolt coursed through me. It hurt. It burned. My body went numb, and my consciousness faded.

“What are you doing?!”

I tried to pull myself upright. Wait... When had I laid down? Why was I in the middle of a field?!

“Hurry into the forest. The others are inside the doors you’ll find there,” Kanzashi’s voice echoed in my head.

“Got it!” I nodded firmly and rushed off.



“Whoa, it’s really coming down.” Ichika and I ran, holding our backpacks over our heads to keep the driving rain off. “Let’s rest at the bus stop!”

“Got it!”

We walked to school, so we wouldn’t be waiting for a bus, but it was still a roof to wait out the downpour under.

“That came out of nowhere.”

“Tell me about it. Ugh, I’m dripping wet now.”

As I ran my fingers moodily through my hair, trying to sluice the rainwater out, I felt something fluffy land on my head.

“Here, use my towel.”

“Oh, thanks. What about you, though?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry about it.” As he spoke, he began to gently dry my head off. I loved how tender he could be sometimes. “Hey, Rin.”

“Yeah?”

“I think I’ll dry your body off, too.”

The words weren’t even out of his mouth before his hands slid down, tracing over my curves.

“Knock it off!”

Pow! A fist put an end to that.

“Owww, that hurt.”

“You’re such a pervert sometimes.”

“Ahahaha...”

Lately, Ichika had taken every chance he could to get his hands on me. I knew what he was after. And I wished he’d be more romantic for our first time.

“Jeez...”

But... I could think of worse things, too. *When he touches me, I feel like I’m walking on air... My heart soars. It feels so good. I wish he’d never stop. That’s how I feel... So maybe... Maybe today’s the day?* I asked myself.

Ka-thump. My heart pounded. That was my answer.

“Hey, look, the sun’s come back out.”

“Huh, it has.”

“So why don’t we head back to my place?”

“Sure. Hey, can I take a shower when we get there?” he asked, and my heart nearly leapt out of my chest. “My hair’s all wet.”

“Oh, of course!” I awkwardly laughed, barely able to handle the pounding of my pulse.

“Anyway, let’s go.”

His hand drifted toward mine, casually. I played indecisive for a moment, before taking it and nodding.

“Yeah...”

We walked along the warming pavement, taking in the scent of the rain. We were almost at my house, the Chinese restaurant Lingyin. My parents’ doting was so embarrassing. Today we were closed, so we didn’t have the awning rolled out. We stopped for a moment in the living room after going through the restaurant and into the house part.

“Ah... Umm...” Our hands were still together. My free hand opened and closed in nervousness. “So, now what? Did you want to shower first?”

“I guess.” Ichika nodded. Imagining him showering, my face began to turn red. *That’ll give me a chance to change my panties!* My heart throbbed.

“Rin.”

“W-What?!”

“Why don’t we shower together?”

I stared blankly, now red up to the tips of my ears.

“Pervert!”

I stomped on his foot and, dropping his hand, ran up the stairs to my room on the second floor. Panting from the sudden exertion, I tried to catch my breath.

Showering together... I shouted silently, punching my pillow.

“Anyway!”

I needed to change! Focusing, I pulled open my underwear drawer. *Which ones should I wear? What’s gonna... Gonna... T-turn him on?* I looked at the panties I’d bought in preparation for today. There were definitely ‘date panties,’

but looking at them again, they really weren't me.

But I can't just stay in these either... I flipped up my skirt to compare with my current pair, white with green stripes. *Yeah, these won't work.* The problem was, I had no confidence in my own figure. *It'll be fine! Ichika's such a pervert, he won't notice! I'll be fine!*

I decided to go ahead and change. Sliding my fingers under the waistband over my hips, I had just lowered my panties to my knees when my door clicked open.

".....?!?!"

"I'm done showering, Rin."

"Wh-Wh-Wh..."

My butt was sticking out. My panties were around my knees. Ichika was looking at me from behind.

"EEEEEEEEEEEEK!"

Bam!

Crunch!

Thwack!

You idiot! You pervert! You creep! I completely lost control of myself, pummeling him until my hands hurt.

"Rin..."

"Eh? Ahh..."

Ichika caught my fist, gently lowering my arm, then spun me around. As he did, he embraced me from behind.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. The pounding of my heart was too loud to bear. It felt like it would tear apart. Not just my heart, my whole body.

"Rin," Ichika whispered in my ear.

I shivered, and nervously asked back, "W-What?"

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

“I want you.”

KA-THUMP!

“Ah... Ahhhhhhhh...”

“Rin...” He kissed the nape of my neck.

“Ahh... Ichika... I feel something hard poking me...”

Another kiss came—and this time his lips remained, sucking.

“You sure do.” Such a sweet whisper. My mind began to boil over.

“Rin. Let’s go to the bed.”

“Y-Yeah...”

He lifted me from behind, carrying me like a princess, and moved to my bed as easily as if I were a newborn kitten.

“I’m putting you down now.” He wove in another kiss to my neck.

“Nya...”

I couldn’t focus enough to move. My body burned as if it was on fire. Nothing could fit in my mind but thoughts of Ichika.

“Rin... You’re beautiful.”

“Mmm...!”

His fingers traced my collarbone, leaving trails as hot as any brand.

“Ichi... ka...”

“I’m taking your clothes off now.”

I swallowed nervously, nodding almost imperceptibly. Unbuttoning my sailor blouse, he gazed at my small breasts, covered by my bra.

“Don’t...”

Embarrassed, I tried to cover myself. Gently, but firmly, he brushed my arms away.

“You’re so cute, Rin.”

“Mmm...”

His tongue slid between my breasts, hotly yet tenderly, softly yet indecently. *Ahhh... I'm such a dirty girl...* Because I wanted more. Because I *needed* more.

"I'm taking your bra off."

"Y-Yeah..."

I watched his fingers, near-hypnotized, and raised my body so he could slide them behind me.

Snap. The sound of my bra unhooking seemed to echo through the whole room. It hung limply around my body, but rather than lift it off, Ichika's hands moved lower. I could feel the fire welling up in me, burning through my core, and only the gentle brush of his fingertips as they crept up my thighs could hold back that flood.

"Here too..."

"W-Wait..."

"No more waiting." He slid my panties down, slowly, starting from one side.

"Ahhhhhh..."

We couldn't. This was wrong. But we were... But it was oh so right.

"Ichika..." I closed my eyes, sighing his name. And then—

"You bastard! What are you doing to Rin?!"

My door slammed open. Standing there was... "I-Ichika?!"

Ichika was there, wearing a white uniform I'd never seen before. *No, wait...* That was an IS Academy uniform. *But Ichika's right here in front of me, how I've always wanted, in a world for us alone.*

[WORLD PURGE ANOMALY. INTRUSION DETECTED. COMMENCE REMOVAL.]

"Eeeeeek!"

It hurt! It hurt it hurt it hurt! My head ached! Inside and out! Like it was splitting apart! I was gonna die! I was dying! Through the pain, I barely noticed the Ichika in a collared uniform in front of me slide away and leap toward the Ichika in IS Academy uniform as his eyes began to gleam. The whites of the first Ichika's eyes faded to black, while his irises glowed a golden yellow.

“Executing order. Removing intruder.” His voice was flat. Ichika’s voice, still, but with utterly alien intonation.

Wait, wait, what is this?! What’s going on here?!

“Save me, Ichika!” I cried out. Suddenly, two strong arms wrapped around me.

“It’ll be okay. I’m here for you. Rin... I’ll protect you.”

Yes... Yes! Yes. *It’s Ichika!*

This was Ichika. The real Ichika. I could tell. Not in my head. Not in my gut. Not in my heart. In my very soul.

“Then...” I gritted my teeth to brace myself against the pain. “Get out of here, you fake!”

I opened the IS Shenlong and fired its impact cannon at full power. The fake Ichika crumbled like a stack of bricks. At the same time, the room began to fall apart around me.

“Rin! Let’s go!”

“Got it!”

We ran toward the door. Toward that embrace of light.



“Where are we?”

“In a forest, it looks like.”

The door we’d just stepped out of evaporated into sparkles of light. Four more doors still stood, surreally, in the middle of the woods.

“Ah...”

“.....?”

“Uh, Rin... Your clothes...”

“Huh?”

I turned to face away as Rin looked down in confusion.

“Eeeeeek!”

Yeah, I was afraid that was going to happen. Rin was still half-out of a middle school uniform, as the fake me had left her.

“I-Ichika!”

“Wait, wait! It wasn’t me! It wasn’t me! So don’t punch me or kick me or shoot me or—”

“—back on me.”

“Huh?”

“My clothes! Put them back on me!”

“Whaaa?!”

“Ugh! You took them off, didn’t you!”

“I told you, that wasn’t me!”

“B-But... It was like...” Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. “It was... It was... Waaaahhhh...”

“Uhh, umm...”

Rin suddenly began to sob. I hadn’t been expecting *that*, and I wasn’t sure what to do. *Well, I guess...* I couldn’t leave her like that.

“Rin.”

She took a moment to form words again. “...What?”

“Okay, okay. I’ll dress you. Come over here.”

“Eh... Ahh... Okay...”

The surprise had stopped her crying, at least. Nervously, she sidled over to me, holding out her bra.

“.....”

“.....”

This felt wrong. To distract myself, I tried to break the ice, “Y-Y’know, it feels like forever since I’ve seen you in this uniform!”

“Yeah! Yeah, it really takes me back! Ahahaha!”

All we could do to cut through the tension was embrace the surreality of it all. Nervously, but decisively, I took hold of her bra. *As long as I don't look too closely...* Somehow, I got it back on her. From there, it was easy to button her blouse. The problem was further down.

“R-Rin? You can handle down there yourse—”

Without uttering a word, her eyes glistened with tears again. *Oh, whatever! I don't even care anymore!*

“I'm going to have to touch your panties.”

Rin trembled gently. Kneeling down, I slid my hands up her skirt, trying not to look. *If I can just get both sides...*



Schlick.

“Waaaaait! W-W-What the hell are you doing?!”

“Quit complaining! I’m trying to do this without looking!”

“Hmph! You can go ahead and look! I don’t mind!” Rin reached down, grasped her hem, and stopped for a second. “I don’t mind... Because it’s you...”

“O-Okay...”

My heart pounded. Nervously, her hands shaking, she began to lift her skirt. The diagonal line of the waistband of her panties, one side pulled halfway down, was almost more suggestive than anything which could be under them.

“O-Okay.”

“.....”

“D-Don’t just go quiet on me...”

“I don’t think I can talk while doing this.” I was a bit harsh, and Rin blushed deeply.

We both fell silent. I was used to doing Chifuyu’s laundry, including her underwear, but this was the first time I’d touched a girl’s panties directly. I could hear my pulse pound in my ears.

It’s just Rin... It’s just Rin... It’s just Rin... Rin was... Rin was a classmate at IS Academy, and my second childhood friend.

“But is that all she is to you?” someone spoke. At least, I thought I heard someone. A girl I didn’t recognize. It sounded like she spoke from behind me, to the left.

“Rin.”

“Y-Yweah?!”

“I’m done.”

“Y-Yeah...”

We suddenly spun away from each other, facing opposite directions. Why

were we being like this?

“Um!”

“.....?!”

Kanzashi, concealed in the undergrowth, suddenly spoke up.

“Ka-Kanzashi...”

“Y-Y-You should have said something if you were there!”

“It didn’t seem like you’d appreciate being interrupted.”

“Ugh...” She stood up, the branches rustling around her. “Anyway, I’m going to take Ling out of here for now. She’s probably in no condition to continue the mission.”

“I can keep going!”

“No. It’s quite likely that your IS has been attacked as well. Let’s go back for now.”

Rin nodded reluctantly and said, “Okay...”

“Anyway, then. Ichika, go after the others.”

“Got it. Oh, Kanzashi! Hold on a second!”

“.....?”

“There’s a leaf in your hair. There, got it.” I plucked out the leaf I’d noticed. “Your hair’s so pretty. It’d be a shame to leave it messy like that.”

“Ah—”

She looked at the ground, fidgeting. What was up with her?

“Oh! I know! I should test-fire my impact cannon. You know, make sure it’s working fine!” Rin suddenly spoke up, a bit too loudly for comfort.

“Wait, what’s gotten into you, Rin?”

“Oh, nothing at all!”

She was definitely extremely mad about something. About to burst into a

rage, it seemed like.

“All right, see you later then!”

“Wait, hold it! Ichika!” If all else fails, retreat. “I’ll teach you a lesson when you get back, Ichika!”

I fled, not through a door, but deeper into the woods.



“Phew...”

My name is Cecilia Alcott. The young master of Alcott and Company, England’s largest trading firm. With my day’s work in my luxuriously-furnished office complete, I rang an order-made platinum bell.

Ding-a-ling... Its tone was delicate, almost ephemeral. No more than three seconds later, a door opened.

“You called, President.”

Entering was a dark-haired young man, seemingly born wearing his jacket and waistcoat. My own butler for so many years—Orimura Ichika. I had wanted to greet him with joy on my face, but I couldn’t help but frown for a moment.

“My work for the day is over...”

“Ah, my apologies, Madam.” Ichika bowed stiffly. But that wasn’t what I had meant, either.

“How often do I have to tell you? We’re alone.”

“Haha. I’m sorry, Cecilia.”

We were so familiar, after all this time, that he occasionally showed a bit of cheek. But the twinkle in his eye as he did excused it, at least for me. *Yes. The Orimuras have been the Alcotts’ faithful servants for generations, and he’s been by my side since—*

Wait, by my side? Who had been by my side?

[COMMENCE WORLD PURGE.]

—Ah, yes! Ichika! As my servant, and perhaps, someday, as my companion.

Thus, when alone, we could put aside the formalities. *Sometimes it all feels rather unbefitting.* But it pleased me all the same; as if we shared a world walled off from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Were it but a dream, I should prefer not to awaken, but rather to remain submerged for all eternity.

[*WORLD PURGE COMPLETE.*]

“.....?”

“What is it, Cecilia?”

“Did you speak, Ichika?”

“Not a word.”

“Ah. Very well.”

Today was a quite special Thursday. My heart leapt at the secret relief which awaited me. *No worries. I passed on the cake yesterday.* Concealing my excitement, I followed Ichika’s lead to the bath on the ground floor, passing under a grandiose chandelier on the way. I could feel my heart throb.

“In five minutes.”

“Of course. And which aroma would you prefer today?”

“I leave it to your own judgment.”

With an elegant wink, I closed the door. Surrounded by handmade luxuries, I scattered my clothes on the floor. Ichika would be along later to pick them up. *Very well, then.* Laying my earrings and pendant on a table, I was as bare as the day I was born. The steam of a clawfoot bathtub, already drawn full, welcomed me further into the room. *My favorite day of the week.*

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Turning a knob, I let the warm water wash over me along with my excitement.

“May I enter, Cecilia?”

Ka-thump! It was Ichika’s voice from outside the door. Calmly, I turned the shower off and answered with an even voice, “At your leisure.”

Click. The sound of the door opening was followed by the patter of Ichika’s bare feet on the tile, as my face glowed red. *Yes. The day of the week that*

Ichika bathes me... Naturally, he was blindfolded.

After adding the salts to the bath, Ichika finally stepped behind me.

“I’m truly sorry for the wait, Cecilia.”

“O-Of course...”

Embarrassed, I couldn’t turn around. *If he were to not be blindfolded...* The mere thought of it was enough to send my mind racing, and I snuck a peek backward. *Ah, but he is.* It was at once reassuring and disappointing. He was, as usual, simply in shirt and trousers.

“Shall I begin bathing you, Cecilia?”

“A-As you will.”

I had barely a moment to be ashamed of my timidity before I felt the already-foamy exfoliating sponge brush against my back. *Ah...* With gentle strokes, relaxing me, he washed my back. As usual, his hands at first stroked the nape of my neck before moving lower. *It feels so wonderful when he washes my hips...*

I was proud of my figure, naturally. Proud enough, even, to put aside cake. *He’s almost there...* I felt Ichika’s hand softly brush my bottom. Not the sponge, but his bare hand, with only a thin layer of lather. My cheeks glowed a brilliant crimson as I sunk into the utmost luxury. *It may be embarrassing, but it feels so sublime...*

As I let out a sigh, he whispered in my ear, “Cecilia, has your bottom gotten bigger?”

“It very much has not!”

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

“Ah, but you’re filling out so nicely here.” His fingertips cupped around my rear.

“Ah!”

“I suppose I should arrange for alterations with your tailor.”

“I-It can’t be any—”

“I know. But it’s such a pleasure to make sure.” With that, he nibbled at my earlobe. Shocked at his sudden forwardness, I curled up in the bath.

“I-Ichika...”

“Shall I wash your front next?”

“Ah.....”

I paused for a moment, then, nervously, nodded.



“I can’t get these doors open, Kanzashi.”

I pounded on the four doors in the clearing. But no matter how hard I shoved or kicked, they wouldn’t budge.

“I knew it! Someone had to have locked them after you got Ling out.”

I was so stunned by Kanzashi’s sudden firm conviction that I couldn’t do much more than smile and nod as she continued, “Whoever it is knows there are two Ichikas in there, and that’s extremely dangerous.”

“So what do I do about it?”

“You’ll have to change skins.”

“Huh?”

“If you change skins, you can get in.”

“.....” As I stood there in shock, Kanzashi continued irritably, “I wasn’t joking.”

“O-Oh. Understood. I believe you.”

“Good.”

“So what do I do?”

“Hold on a minute. I’ll rewrite your clothing data.”

I could hear the clatter of mechanical keys over our connection. Soon, I began to glow.

“Wait—”

“Data install... Complete.”

“What is this?”

I was in black from head to toe, with a gas mask strapped to my face. From one shoulder hung a submachine gun.

“Her Majesty’s Special Air Service battle dress.”

‘Her Majesty’s’... This must be Cecilia, then.

“I feel like I’m in a movie or something.”

“Oh my God, you look so cool.”

“Wait, what?”

“Ahem! Nothing.”

I gave the blue door’s knob another try. With a click, it opened before me.

“Here I go.”

“Be careful. You may be attacked by another fake you.”

“W-What?!”

I pulled back the bolt on the submachine gun and slapped my magazine pouch to make sure it was full.

“Have you ever shot a gun before?”

“A man’s always ready to risk it all on one shot.”

“I thought not.”

I stepped through the door as Kanzashi sighed.



“You’ve grown here, as well.”

“Mmm!” As he lifted my breasts from behind, I let out an unbecoming sigh. At first, he scooped them up from below, but soon his fingers traced all over them. And just as they were about to rub against the very tips...

Krshshhshhhhh!

“What the hell are you doing?!”

The window shattered, and a man in a special forces uniform bathed Ichika in a hail of fire.

“ICHIKA!”

“World purge anomaly... Intrusion detected... Glugh...” Shot through the head, Ichika’s neck bent inhumanly even as he continued to mumble words I couldn’t understand. His eyes gleamed gold and black.

“Ichika?”

Something was wrong. But what?

“Get away from Cecilia!” The soldier knocked Ichika to the floor with his gun’s butt before opening fire again.

Ichika?! A black fluid began to ooze out of his wounds, before he finally disappeared into sparkling light.

“Ah— Ahhh...”

“Are you okay, Cecilia?! I’m here to save—”

Opening Blue Tears, I swept at the intruder with its Interceptor blade.

“My Ichika! You killed my Ichika! My one and only!”

“Hey! Hey, wait! Knock it off, you idiot!”

“Idiot?! You dare to call Cecilia Alcott, the British National Cadet—”

Wait. *My name is Cecilia Alcott. A... A British National Cadet?* The world swam around me.

[WORLD PURGE INTRUSION.]

Fzzt!

“Ouch!” My head ached. Like it was about to split in half. “Ugh... I... I... I’m—”

“Cecilia!”

The soldier pulled off his gas mask, revealing Ichika’s face. His piercing eyes. His forceful voice. Yes, the man who I could barely resist.

“Let’s blow our way out of this fake world!”

Yes. This, this was my Ichika!

“Together!”

I aimed my Starlight Mk. III at the ceiling, and fired. Around me, the world of illusion shattered.



“That was simply terrible!” Cecilia, in her school uniform, angrily crossed her arms, before angrily twisting at her curls, shaking her head, and crossing them again.

“At least you’re safe.”

“Safe? *Safe*?! With what that impostor was about to do—” Cecilia suddenly stopped midway through snapping at me. “I-Ichika? You... You were in that bathroom, correct?”

Ugh. She had realized what I’d really hoped she wouldn’t.

“Y-You... You saw me naked, didn’t you?”

“I-I didn’t look! I didn’t look!”

“You liar! Blue Tears!” She suddenly opened her IS, and pointed an accusing finger, her face bright red. “Go, bits!”

“C’mon! No way!” But this was no joke. Four bits opened up a rain of beam fire. “Whoa! Stop it, stop it! You’re gonna kill me!”

“It’s what you deserve for treating me so disgracefully!”

“It wasn’t me! It wasn’t me!”

“I don’t care if it wasn’t you, it *was* Ichika!”

“That doesn’t even make any sense!” A beam scorched the seat of my pants. “Cecilia!”

“I don’t care what your excuse is!”

“You were beautiful!”

“Eh?”

She, and her bits, suddenly stopped dead in their tracks.

“Just... You were really beautiful!”

It was really embarrassing to say. But it was true, and more importantly, it was probably the only way to get her to stop trying to kill me.

She dematerialized her IS. In a bashful tone, she replied, “I... I suppose I don’t mind being seen by you...”

“It was an honor!”

“And to call me the most beautiful woman in the world as well?” *I don’t think I said that...* “Why, Ichika!”

I ducked her diving hug-tackle and fled into the woods.

“Haah... Phew...”

Well, she really was beautiful. I’d always thought of her as like a model, but I was wrong. She was beyond that. I blushed, thinking about it.

“So she looked a bit different today?” Again, I heard a voice whisper to me, before it was lost on the wind. “...Ichika.”

It was Kanzashi. And she didn’t sound happy at all.

“What next, Kanzashi?”

“I’m sending you a new skin. You figure it out.”

The connection dropped with a loud click.

“What’s up with her?” I was confused. A moment later, a huge suitcase fell from above me. “Whaa?!”

I nervously swallowed after my close brush with death by crushing.

“Did I do something wrong?”

I couldn’t figure out what.

Anyway, though. There were Charl, Laura, and Houki left to save. All right.

“Let’s do this!”

I popped open the suitcase.



My name is Charlotte Dunois. I'm a student at IS—

[WORLD PURGE COMPLETE.]

—a maid in the service of the wealthy Orimura family. But that would all be over in a week. Because...

“Charlotte.”

“Wha—” I yelped in surprise as I felt a hand stroke my butt, then wrapped both arms around the broom I'd just almost dropped. “Master?! A-Again?!”

“It was just a quick feel. And isn't it about time you stopped calling me ‘master’?”

“But...”

The previous head of the family, who had hired me straight out of an orphanage, had passed away last year, and now my master—Ichika—had taken his place. Ichika's first announcement as head of the family was that he would ‘take the maid Charlotte as his wife.’ A week from now, he and I were to be wed.

“But I'm still a maid...”

“Oh? Then, surely, your master's word is law?”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

“Really.” Intrigued, he reached out and flipped my skirt up.

“Eeeeeek!”

“You always wear such sexy lingerie, Charlotte.”

“I-I-It's because Master told me to!”

They were sheer and see-through, with a fringe of white lace. I wore them, not just because he ordered me to, but in hopes that maybe one day he'd ask me to stay the night.

“You're blushing, Charlotte.”

“Why, Master! I don't know what's gotten into you. Now if you'll excuse me, I have work to finish!” I spun around, trying to get away, only to feel his arms

wrap around me.

“I’m not letting you escape.”

“No, wait... I still have work to do...”

His hands ran over my butt as he said, “And isn’t part of that work catering to my whims?”

“Mmmm... U-Understood...” I nodded timidly, blushing a bright red. With that, he suddenly swept me off my feet.

“I’ve caught myself an adorable little maid!”

“Someone will see us here...”

“It’s fine. They already know how things are between us.”

“That isn’t what I meant...”

Even as I argued with him, my cheeks glowed with happiness.

“Let’s go to my room.”

His kiss on my cheek left me as meek as a newborn kitten. *I can’t resist...* I didn’t even want to resist. My heart and my body were his, if he’d only reach out and take them. My beloved Ichika. My dear master.

“We’re here, Charlotte.”

“Mm...”

Ichika had carried me to his bedroom. Now, he gently set me down on his canopy bed. *Is this... Is this finally...*

Ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump. My heart ached as it tried to leap from my chest.

“Charlotte...” I watched him up close for a moment as he leaned down over me, before closing my eyes. “Hehe. I’ve got a present for you today.”

It was only as I felt his finger trace over my lips that I realized he wasn’t about to kiss me. *Ahh... So it’s something else...* I was relieved and disappointed, all at once. As I clung to that bittersweet feeling, I felt a dress drift down over me.

“Ah... This, this is!”

“Yes. For our wedding.” A pure white wedding dress, the kind every girl dreams of, was lying over me. “Try it on, Charlotte.”

“O-Okay.” With a nervous swallow and an energetic nod, Ichika and I rose from the bed.

“.....”

“.....”

“Er... Master?”

“What is it, Charlotte?”

“If you’re there, I... I can’t...”

“You can’t change?”

“Y-Yes.” I clutched the dress to myself while nodding. *Ahh, this is so embarrassing.*

“Why don’t you let me watch?”

“Huh?”

“Let me watch you change.”

“Uh...”

“I want to see.”

“But, um...”

“Please,” he said as he gave me a cheeky wink.

Ugh, I can’t refuse when he makes that face... But I stood silent, unable to bring myself to say ‘yes’ either. “May I, Charlotte?”

“Y-Yes...”

“Thank you.” Ichika kissed me again on the cheek, as if rewarding me. Even that little gesture filled me with joy. *I’m such a pushover...* As a smile rose to my face, I laid the dress down on the bed, then turned to face Ichika.

“I... I’m going to str—uh, change now...” I nervously corrected myself halfway through playing ‘strip.’ That would have been a bit much.

Swallowing nervously, I started by untying my apron. It rustled against my dress as it dropped. It was only an apron, but somehow, I could feel Ichika's gaze and my heart felt like it would burst. *It's okay, there's nothing to worry about... He's already seen me in my underwear so many times...* But this was the first time I'd be stripping down myself. As I thought about it, my hands grew timid.

"You can do it! Once you get married, you'll be doing this every night!"

Wait...

"Charlotte, did you just say 'every night'?"

"I-I said that out loud?!"

"Yeah."

"Nngh!"

My face suddenly turned bright red, so quickly I felt like Ichika could hear it coming to a boil. *That's right! What was I talking about? We needed to at least take Sunday nights off to catch our breath— Wait, no, that wasn't the problem!* I shook my head, but the dirty thoughts just wouldn't go away.

"Charlotte, dear. Your hands have stopped."

"Y-Yeah..."

I needed to clear my mind. Embrace nothingness. My mind empty, I quickly undid the buttons of my dress.

"You don't have to hurry like that."

"The slower I go, the more embarrassing it is."

Ichika grinned knowingly. *Ahh, I can't take this anymore!* Steeling my will, I pulled my dress over my head in one swift motion and threw it on the floor. Embarrassed by Ichika's piercing gaze playing over me, I reflexively covered my bra and panties with my hands.

"You don't have to stare like that, Ichika..."

"But it's such a beautiful sight."

"Jeez, you..."

It didn't feel bad, though. If anything, hearing that from someone I loved was emboldening, not embarrassing.

"I-Ichika... Do... Do you want to see more?"

"Yes." He didn't hesitate for a moment.

My face absolutely burned and I muttered, "Ichika, you pervert... Whatever are we going to do with you?"

I slowly pulled my hands away, revealing my lacy, see-through lingerie. All that was left on my body were the headdress, garter belt, and white knee-high socks which proved I was a maid. Along with a bra and panties. *It's embarrassing... But if it's Ichika seeing, I don't mind...*

Just as I thought that, the door flew open, and a strange figure stepped into the room.

"Now what the hell are you doing?!" he shouted as he rushed toward Ichika. He was wearing a mask, cape, boots, and gloves—the very picture of a gentleman thief.

"Who the hell are you?!"

"No, who the hell are *you*?!"

"Ichika!" Wanting to protect Ichika from the man who'd tackled him, I pulled a saber from its decorative place on the wall and brandished it. "Get away from my master!"

"Whoa!"

My first slash cut through the air, only a hairs-breadth away from the thief.

"Calm down, Charl!"

"How dare a thief give me a nickname!"

Huh...?

"Thanks, Charlotte."

Hold on a minute, here. *My name is Charlotte. But... Someone special calls me Charl...*

[WORLD PURGE INTRUSION.]

Zzzt!

“Ugh!”

My head suddenly ached. *I... I like...*

“Call me Charl!” I yelled as I turned my blade away from the real Ichika and toward the fake. At the same time, the color of the fake Ichika’s eyes changed.

“World purge anomaly... Intrusion detected... Glugh...”

The fake Ichika’s head leapt from his neck, cut loose by my saber.

“Man, I know he’s fake, but watching yourself get decapitated is still a little unsettling,” the real Ichika quietly muttered. From the neck of the imposter shot forth, not blood, but sparkling light. “Let’s get out of here, Charl!”

“Eh?!”

Ichika suddenly wrapped his arms around me. As his cape swept over me, I heard the sound of breaking glass from far away. *I can feel Ichika’s pulse...* Awash in a sea of warm emotion, I left the false world behind.



“Phew...”

Back in the forest, I set Charl down.

“Eeeeeek!”

“Wait, wha— Gah!”

“Don’t look! Ichika, you pervert!”

Charl was covering my eyes with her hands, but I could still see that she was in the sexy underwear she’d been wearing rather than her IS Academy uniform.

“Why?! Cecilia came back in uniform.”

“I-It doesn’t matter! I told you, don’t look!”

“Owwwww!” I could feel her thumbs dig into my eye sockets.

“Ah! S-Sorry! Just, um, you’re the one who told me to wear these, and then to

take them off...”

“But that was the fake me...”

“So you’re just going to make excuses?!”

That wasn’t an excuse, it was the truth.

“Wait, c’mon, Charl—” I pulled off my cape and spread it over her shoulders, while pleadingly grinning. “Do you want your face to get stuck like that?!”

Without a word, Charl spun around. *Well, that was a failure.* Charl pouted at me, her back turned, and muttered, “...A date.”

“Huh?”

Hearing me respond, she spun back around. Covering herself with the cape, she continued, “You heard me! A date! Take me to an amusement park, and I’ll forgive you.”

“Oh, sure. Yeah, let’s all go toge—”

“No! Just the two of us!” She glared at me, tears beginning to well up in her eyes. *Ugh... I can’t refuse when she makes that face...* I nodded resignedly and said, “Fine... I’ll have to dig into my savings...”

“Really?! For real?!”

“Wait, it was your idea.”

“Well, yeah, but...” Charl’s smile gleamed as she clasped her cheeks in glee. “I did it! I finally managed to ask him!”

From her giggling, it seemed like she was back to her usual self. That was a relief, at least.

“Anyway, let’s get you out of cyberspace for now. I’ll see you out.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Kanzashi’s voice came as she once again appeared from the woods. “I’ll lead her out.”

“Oh, okay.” She sounded mad enough that I didn’t want to argue with her.

“First things first. Charlotte’s clothing... Download complete.” Charl was wrapped in light, and when it faded, she wore an IS Academy uniform.

“Anyway, Ichika. I’m leaving for a little bit. Don’t forget your promise!” Charl, somehow sounding very excited, skipped off back toward the fields. Before she followed, Kanzashi disgustedly muttered to me, “Playing favorites, huh.”

“What?! Wait, no, I was just—”

She had already frowned and turned away. Now left alone, I scratched my head in confusion.

[I’m glad you could see her smile again.]

Was I just hearing things? I couldn’t tell if I’d really heard that voice or not. Anyway...

“Two doors left. They must be Laura and Houki.” I guessed I must have been saving the hardest for last. “Ah well, a man’s gotta do what he’s gotta do.”

I rifled through the suitcase.



My name is Laura Bodewig. Bundeswehr officer. Commander of the IS-equipped ‘Schwarze Hase’—

[WORLD PURGE COMPLETE.]

—a groom still enthralled with my bride of two months. We’d made our little love nest in a standalone house, bought on my officers’ salary. It was large for just two people, but soon enough, it would be filled with a loving family.

“Hmm...” I spread out the morning paper as I waited for breakfast. “The balance of power is shifting in the Middle East. I wonder, will it affect Germany?”

“Laura, you promised me you wouldn’t read at the table.”

“Mm. I’m sorry.” As I apologized, my bride placed a mug of hot cocoa—heavy on the milk—in front of me. *I’m truly blessed to have such a bride.* I nodded to myself. My bride’s name was Orimura Ichika.

“Laura, your omelet is ready.” As I took the fluffy, cooked-with-love omelet, I looked up at Ichika. He looked so proud in his apron.

“Ah, Ichika. Actually...” I cleared my throat. “I’ve managed to get the day off.

So...”

“So we can be together all day?”

“Mm...” I shyly nodded, and a gleaming grin sprung to his face.

“Then I need to use one of these!”

“Ugh! You mean—”

The ‘do-anything’ tickets we’d traded with each other on our one-month anniversary. Seeing my own handwriting on them just embarrassed me more. *And just how far are you going to push ‘anything’ this time...* Last time he’d made me dress in Gothic Lolita fashion.

What would it be now? As a nurse? *“Laura, my very own healing angel...”*

As a maid? *“Call me ‘Master’...”*

Or even in a bunny suit?! *“Laura, my cute little bunny...”*

“Laura? Laura.”

“W-What?!”

“You have a nosebleed,” Ichika said as he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped my face.

“I-I can do it myself, silly!”

“I know, I know.”

“You only have to say it once!”

“Anyway, say ‘ahh.’”

Chomp... *Ahh, Ichika’s omelets are so fluffy and moist...* Wait, this was no time to let my guard down!

“Ichika!”

“Yes?”

“J-Just what do you plan on asking for?!” I only realized I’d risen to my feet as Ichika teasingly scolded me, “Now, now, calm down. An officer should never lose her nerve, right?”

“...True.” I seated myself again, nibbled my toast, took a bite of salad, sipped my cocoa.

“Naked apron, probably.”

Pffffbbbt!

“*Cough, cough.* W-What?!”

“I want to see you naked except for an apron! Pretty please?”

“Silly! Who would ever do something like that?!”

I leaned over the table to glare at Ichika up close, only for him to kiss me on the forehead. ***Smooch.***

“Ah...”

“Pweeeeeeze? Laura?”

“Umm...”

“L-Like this?” My voice wavered as I nervously stepped into the living room. All that I wore was my eyepatch and an apron. I couldn’t imagine being any more embarrassed. Even though I pressed the cloth firmly to my body, I could feel Ichika’s gaze caress over me. “Ahh...”

“You’re adorable, Laura.”

“Shut up. Just shut up!”

Ichika’s gentle voice only fanned the flames of my embarrassment, “You know, since you’re wearing an apron, why don’t you cook something.”

“W-What?!”

“You’ll be even cuter if you do.”

“Ugh...”

I couldn’t resist anything he said, it was so cute. I hated being so silly, so tiny... But I loved it, too. *I’m such a weak woman.* I regretted it, but at the same time, was delighted to recognize it.

“Okay, but I won’t forgive you if you do anything weird,” I mumbled.

“Anything weird? Like what?”

“I thought I told you! Just... Just anything dirty, like... Ugh! Don’t make me say it!”

I jabbed Ichika in the gut, before stomping off to the kitchen.

“Oww... Oh, hey, Laura.”

“What?”

“Your butt is adorable.” He gave my bare bottom a playful spank. As my mind overheated, I began to spin around to reply with a fist. But he caught my fist in his soft hands, and wrapped me in an embrace from behind. “You’re so cute, Laura.”

“C’mon! Stop it, you idi— Ah!”

He began to fondle my breasts through the apron. As he felt my body tense in response, he whispered, sweetly yet naughtily, in my ear, “Let’s keep doing this all day.”

“D-Doing what?!”

“Making out.”

He kissed my neck. *I... I— I—* My head swam. But... *Maybe I should let myself be swept away...* My mind was suddenly torn away from its vision of paradise by an angry shout, “Dammit, this again?! Why is everyone dreaming of this kind of junk?!”

A man in gleaming armor crashed through the door.

“Who the hell are you?!”

I cast about for a weapon and, finding a filet knife close at hand, flung it at the armored man. With a grind, it pierced into his chest... But not deep enough.

“Are you trying to kill me?!”

“Of course I am. Anyone who tries to get between Ichika and I deserves death!” Ducking out of Ichika’s embrace, I stayed low as I closed in on the armored intruder. “Hah!”

“.....!”

I kicked high, planting my foot firmly in the one place the armor doesn't cover. As I struck home, I could feel my foe's bones creak.

“Ugh!” The armored man sank to his knees. Jerking the knife out of his chest, I nimbly flipped its tip up toward his neck.

"It's over. Die."

“Do your best, Laura!” I suddenly heard Ichika’s cheering voice from behind me, and my heart did a backflip.

“Of course I will. I’m about to finish—”

“You bastard, you’re making Laura fight for you?!” The armored man suddenly stood. Surprised, I cut at him with the knife, but I could feel its blade slide off him.

“Get out of my way, Laura!”

“Do your best, Laura!”

The two voices, Ichika's voice, came from both in front of and behind me. /... /... Brushing by me as I wavered, the armored man drew his sword.

“GRYAAAAAAH!”

“Do your best, Laura!”

The sword pierced Ichika's breast, yet, even though it plunged through his heart, not a single drop of blood fell. Instead, he began repeating the same phrase, like a broken record.

“Do your best, Laura!”

Over and over.

“Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura!”

Endlessly.

"Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best,
Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your
best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do
your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura!
Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best,

Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura! Do your best, Laura!”

As he repeated, the words ‘do your best’ almost seemed to twist into ‘fight your hardest.’ *I... I was born to fight...*

“No fucking way!”

The armored man slammed Ichika into the wall, then jerked his sword straight upward. Even as his head was sliced in two, Ichika continued his repetition, “Do your best... Laura... Fight... Fight... Kill... Kill...”

Ah... Ahhhhhhh...

“Ahhhhhh! No! No, I won’t! I’m not a machine made to fight—”

“Laura!” The man finally began to strip off his armor. As he pulled off his helmet, I saw a familiar face. “It’s okay now, Laura. You’re you. No one could ever take your place. You don’t have to fight.”

“Ahh... Ichika...”

Wrapped in his warm embrace, the world faded around me.



“All right...”

Back in the woods, I set the sleeping Laura down on a patch of grass. Her even breath was proof that her dreams were peaceful. Looking her over, she seemed completely untouched.

“Almost like Sleeping Beauty.” I poked her nose. “She’s really cute like this.”

I sat down beside her and gazed up at the sky and muttered to myself, “You know, I wonder why I keep showing up in all of these, anyway.”

“Let me answer that.” Once again, Kanzashi’s face poked out of the underbrush.

“C’mon, stop scaring me like that.”

“Okay...” She nodded, seemingly back to her usual unenergetic self, and stepped forth.

“Jeez, you’re just covered in leaves again.” I picked them from her hair, one

by one, as her face reddened. “Anyway, have you figured out how they’re being attacked?”

“Yes. It seems like the enemy’s accessing each of their minds directly, searching for their deepest fantasies, then showing them what they long for in order to cut them off from the outside world and inflict psychological damage. The intent of this is to—”

As Kanzashi spoke, Laura suddenly shot bolt upright, and she yelled out, “What are you talking about?! My ‘deepest fantasies’?! Have you gone mad?”

I couldn’t help but be amused by how flustered she was, and reached out to smooth her hair which had gone all over when she rocketed up. “Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” I said.

“Sleeping Beauty?! Ichika, Ichika, you—!”

Laura leapt at me, ready to wring my neck, only to be stopped when Kanzashi poked her cheek and said, “Your cheeks are bright red.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Meaning...?” I asked.

“Nailed it.”

“Wait, no, wrong! It’s all wrong! Why on earth would I be dreaming of a happy marriage?! Or a peaceful life?! Or three beautiful children?! I’m a frontline soldier! I live for my du—”

“Laura.” I patted her head, trying to calm her down. “Get out of here and get some rest. Okay?”

“Mm...”

The more I patted her head, the more the sensation of her hair on my fingers soothed me. Just as I was really beginning to enjoy myself, Kanzashi cleared her throat, “Ahem!”

Regretfully, I drew my hand back, and Kanzashi continued, “Anyway. We’re going back.”

“Got it. Be careful.”

“Ichika. When you make it back, we need to talk.”

“Huh?”

“F-Forget about it for now! That’s an order!” I saluted Laura as she shushed me, and we parted.

“Hmm...”

I fixed my eyes on the final door. *Their deepest fantasies, huh.* What on earth did that impossibly-Japanese swordswoman dream of?

“...You know. I don’t actually have to go in there.” I suddenly felt a wave of intense malice wash over me. “I was just kidding, ahahaha.”

Fishing through the suitcase again, I picked out an appropriate outfit.

“All right. Let’s go.”

I opened the final door.



My name is Shinonono Houki. Ichika’s childhood friend, and his senior at the dojo. I’m also a student at IS Academy—

[*WORLD PURGE.....COMPLETE.*]

—Caretaker of Shinonono Shrine, together with Ichika. When not performing the duties of a shrine maiden, I instruct children in the way of the blade.

“Nine-hundred and ninety-eight... Nine-hundred and ninety-nine... One thousand!” Finishing my thousandth practice swing of the day, I wipe the sweat from my brow.

“You really take your morning practice seriously.” Ichika had brought me a towel. He was in gi and hakama as well, and their black coloring suited him well.

“Are you starting now?”

“Nah, I finished an hour ago. I just got back from a run.”

“I see... I suppose we can...”

“Hm?”

“Oh, nothing!”

“Huh. Well, why don’t we have breakfast? I made your favorite, miso with daikon slices.”

“Mhm.”

I followed a smiling Ichika inside.



“That’s strange.” Inside the digital world of light and shadow, the ‘enemy’ attacking IS Academy whispered to themselves. “World Purge is less effective on Shinonono Houki. I wonder why?”

It couldn’t have been just that it didn’t completely take. Houki was cut off completely from the outside world. *Hmm...* The girl couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. Uneasily, she reached her destination in the virtual world.

This must be the system core... Wandering through this pathless world, with its Escherian twists and turns, she had finally reached its center—an icebound statue of a girl. *It’s just like Tabane said...* Looking up at a massive block of ice, she whispered, “The core of Orimura Chufuyu’s IS ‘Kurezakura’...”



“All right, let’s begin sparring. En garde!”

“En garde!”

I—Shinonono Houki—and Ichika, wearing our kendo gear, rise smoothly. Our shinai clash against each other, as we gauge our distance.

A silent, tense atmosphere grips the dojo. In kendo, the one who moves first is at a disadvantage. Answering your opponent’s moves is key. However, it’s also possible to fix the tempo of the bout by taking the initiative. We silently size up each other, seeking to understand the other’s breath, their footwork, their rhythm. Understand when they’ll attack, and be ready to counter.

But— *He’s completely unreadable... You’ve improved, Ichika. So I’ll have to...* Pulling my shinai inward, I press toward Ichika. As he shoves forward himself, I use the momentum to leap backward, evading his counter.

“Haah!”

Swiftly, I slash across his torso. Our bodies brush by one another.

“...You got me.” It was me who admitted defeat. Just before my slash connected, his own shinai struck my mask. It was a swift, decisive riposte.

“Thank you very much!” After thanking each other, we put away our shinai. Stepping out of the dojo, we kneeled side by side and removed our masks.

“Phew.” I had lost, but my heart was full of cheer. As I gazed upon Ichika happily, our eyes met. “Ah...”

It had been three months since Ichika had begun boarding at the Shinonono Shrine to make his commute to high school easier. At first his talents had been dulled, but soon enough they began to return and he was a match even for me.

“Houki, I’m going to get changed and sweep the courtyard.”

“Understood. I’m going to take a quick bath and wash off some of this sweat.”

For a moment, I imagined that he would peek in on me, but the Ichika I knew wasn’t that kind of man. He was the very picture of Japanese propriety. *Well... I would like it if he were to marry into the Shrine, for us to someday raise children, and finally, spend our golden years together— Ah!*

“A-Ahem. That’s still some ways ahead of us. For now, I’m happy just to be by Ichika’s side. To be closer to him than anyone...”

[WORLD PURGE INTRUSION DETECTED. PROCEEDING TO ELIMINATE.]

“...Mm?” As I stood to put away my gear, a man in white hakama strode into the dojo’s doorway. His face was hidden by his mask. What was an outsider doing here in full gear? “I’m sorry, we’re closed today.”

“I, ah... I’m here with a challenge!”

“What?”

“There’s a man named me— Uh, I mean, a man named Orimura Ichika here. I want to challenge him!”

“Oh really.” Challenging my Ichika? He was courageous, I’d give him that. But... “I can already see who will be the victor, though.”

“You never know until you try, Houki.” *Hm? How does he know my name?*

“Anyway! I want to challenge Orimura Ichika to a duel!”

“Hmph. If you insist, I’ll go call for him.”

With a proud sneer, I turned and set out for the courtyard to find Ichika.



“Ichika, that was close.”

“Uhh... I know, I know, I just got caught up in the moment. Sorry.”

Kanzashi cut in to warn me, and I apologized for almost giving away who I was.

“Be careful. Houki’s Ichika is the strongest...”

“Huh? Why?”

“You really are that dense, aren’t you...” The connection dropped as quickly as it had been opened. At the same time, the fake me strode into the dojo.

“I’ll warn you, Ichika is just as strong as I am, and I’m the assistant instructor. There’s no way a roughneck like you stands a chance.”

You sure do like to talk him up...

“Isn’t that right, Ichika?” I could almost see her melt as he grinned in response. Just seeing that expression aimed at the fake me made my blood boil.

“Of course it is, Houki.” *How on earth is he that much of a blockhead?! The fake me smiled back at her, and she stared, enraptured, at his face. What’s with you, Houki? You never smile at me like that.*

Holding back the rage and frustration welling up in me, I raised my shinai. Directly before me, the fake me did too, palpably pumped up by Houki’s cheers. *All right, I just need to take him down and— **Smack!***

“Eh...?”

The staccato echo of a shinai rang through the dojo as my head felt like a bomb had just gone off next to it.

“Touch!” Houki proudly, elegantly announced my loss.

No way! C’mon, he’s insane! He wasn’t just on a level with Houki. He was far

stronger. Honestly, he may even have been a match for Chifuyu. His footwork was swift, with not an ounce of effort wasted. His movements flowed like water as he leapt to strike. He could read me like a book, too. By every possible measure, he was first-class.

“I knew you could do it, Ichika!” Houki grinned from ear to ear.

“Of course I could, Houki.” The fake me’s reply was every bit as manipulative as his very existence.

I was filled with envy I couldn’t even explain, so frustrated it hurt to breathe.

“One more time!” I yelled out before even realizing it.

“Hmph. No matter how many times you try, it’ll end the same way.” Houki fixed me with a cold glare as she pronounced judgment. I wanted to argue, but I clamped down on that impulse and raised my shinai again.

“I suppose I’ll take you on again.”

“You’re so kind... Ichika.” My eyebrow twitched.

“A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do,” fake me grinned. Houki giggled, and my other eyebrow twitched.

“Let’s do this, then!” I hated how they looked at each other, and my voice cracked in childish frustration. I didn’t even understand myself why it bothered me so much. But every ounce of me was screaming that it just wasn’t right.

“Begin!” Houki’s voice echoed.

I struck swiftly at the fake me’s hands, but rather than pulling back defensively, he struck to overpower me. I lost my balance at his sudden counterattack, and smoothly, he struck my mask again.

“Match!” Houki’s voice rang out clearly. But I was—

“I’m not finished yet!”

Again, I challenged the fake me.



What’s even with this guy? The dojo challenger had lost 27 straight matches to Ichika, but he still hadn’t given up. Still, though, his breath was ragged and

his focus was long since destroyed. *He'll never be able to beat Ichika like this...* It was obviously impossible... Yet, something drove him to keep trying. Something, indeed.

He never gives up, never stops trying. Who was it? Who had I seen with that determination? Who? Who?!

“Whaa!”

“Huh?!” The question had taken my attention away from the bout. The man’s legs had been swept out from under him by Ichika, and, catching him by his foot, Ichika swung him my way. ***Smoosh.***

“Ah...” Grasping for something to hold him upright, the man’s hands plunged directly into my bosom.



“Wait, no, sorry, I wasn’t trying to—”

“You— You creep!” *I swear, every single time!* “I won’t forgive you for this, Ichika!”

...*Huh?*

“Wait, if you’re... Ichika? Then, who’s that?”

“Eh? Uh, umm...”

That awkward hesitation... This was Ichika! It was Ichika, I knew it!

“Take off that mask!”

“Whoa, stop it! Stop it, Houki!”

He called me by name! I knew it was him!

“Ichika! You little... Why do you always do this kind of—”

“Houki, I’m Ichika!” the fake Ichika cried out.

“Be quiet— Disappear!” As Houki’s clarion call echoed, the fake Ichika disappeared, and the scenery faded from the false dojo back to the forest.

“Uhh, Houki... Are you okay?” Ichika, in a butler’s uniform, stared at me in surprise.

“Okay? *Okay?!* You just grabbed my chest!” Before I even realized it, I was in a rage. “It’s time for your punishment!”

Opening my IS, I summoned forth my Karaware blade.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! That’s even worse than coming at me with a sword— WHOA!”

“You’re not getting away from this!”

I chased after the fleeing Ichika. For some reason, I was enjoying it. Even more than I enjoyed that maudlin dream...



“So everything I saw in there was just an illusion created by this ‘World Purge’ thing? And all they were trying to do with it was buy time? Ugh, now I’m really

ticked off.”

It was only back in the real world, listening to Kanzashi’s explanation, that Houki realized what had happened.

“What I don’t understand is why Houki managed to break free from it so easily.” Cecilia, Ling, Charlotte, and Laura looked around nervously. “Especially compared to everyone else, who just—mmph!”

Four hands covered Kanzashi’s mouth.

“Why, whyever would you think that?”

“Mhm! We were just about to snap out of it on our own too!”

“Yeah! She’s right!”

“Certainly!”

Houki side-eyed the four for a moment, before turning her gaze to Ichika, who still hadn’t awakened. *I hope he’s safe, but... I’m worried...*



“All right, I finally made it.”

Walking out from under the cover of the trees, I found myself on a glimmering white beach, with the sapphire sea stretching out to the horizon. *Is this the system core?* I had a weird feeling almost like déjà vu, like I’d been here before but like it was my first time too.

“Wait, is that...”

A lone girl stood amidst the flat expanse of the dunes. Her hair was long and silver. *Huh? Do I recognize her from somewhere? But she doesn’t look familiar...* As I approached her, her silver hair began to ring a bell.

“Laura? Is that you?”

As I called out to the girl, she turned around. Her eyes were closed, but she replied, “I don’t believe we’ve met. My name is Chloe. Chloe Chronicle. I’ll be leaving now.”

Even as she spoke, she sank into her shadow and began to disappear.

“H-Hey. Wait up!” My call was in vain as she faded away. “What do I do now?”

I still wasn’t able to get in contact with Kanzashi. With no other choice, I walked along the beach, and soon found another woman at the water’s edge. “Ah...”

The black-haired beauty was my—



“Man, he’s still out cold?” Ling sighed as she looked down at Ichika’s limp form in the bed. “Perhaps he fell for the same sort of trap as we did?”

Kanzashi disagreed, quietly but firmly, “I don’t think that’s possible now. The system’s already been cleared.”

“So why isn’t he waking up?” Charlotte asked curiously, only to be met by Laura’s intent gaze.

“Maybe if we kiss him,” she said with a deadly serious tone.

“Wait, whaaaaaaat?!” Everyone but Laura raised their voice in surprise. If you listened closely, you could even hear Kanzashi shout a little.

“Kiss him?! What are you talking about!”

“Hmph. Didn’t you ever learn about that? The way to wake up a sleeping princess has always been to kiss them. At least, that’s what my second-in-command said.”

“Sounds like she needs a demotion...”

While Ling rolled her eyes, Cecilia spoke up energetically, “Ah, but wait! We’d be fools to let the opportunity pass!”

“Seriously? What’s gotten into you, Ceci—”

“And who better but myself? I, Cecilia Alcott, of proud noble blood, have a duty to wake the sleeping Prince Ichika!” Cecilia sniffed haughtily.

“Ehh?! Wait, no fair! I’m a cadet too!” Charlotte raised her hand, not wanting to miss her chance.

“A-Ahem! I mean, it’s just kind of like CPR, isn’t it?” Houki softly raised her

own as her gaze played over Ichika.

“Well I can do it too, okay?!” Ling’s hand shot into the air.

“Come on! It was my idea! Don’t try to steal it!” Laura’s voice rose as she argued, and in the confusion, Kanzashi made her own move first.

“.....”

“Hold it!” Houki grabbed her right arm, and Laura her left.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to sneak in?”

“I-I just... That wasn’t what I was trying to do, but the longer we sit here and watch him, the longer it seems like it’s going to take. So I was thinking about taking a more active approach and breaking the deadlock, not to force my way in, but because I feel like it’s only the right thing to do. And someone has to take responsibility, so—”

“Gah! That’s too long! Too long and too complicated! It’s got more twists in it than Cecilia’s hairstyle!” Ling cried out.

“Indeed, indeed...! Wait, Ling, what was that about my hair?”

As the argument continued, Charlotte, left off to the side, suddenly had a revelation, “Wait, is this my chance?”



“Like hell it is!” Ling, trying to cut her off, launched into a dropkick. Charlotte weaved to the side, evading, just as the door behind her slid open.

“What are you brats going on about— Oh?” Ling’s foot connected with Chifuyu’s belly. Of course, she was completely unscratched. “I always knew you’d try this someday, Huang.”

“I, uh... Ahhhhhhhh...” Ling trembled as the others could only muster wan smiles as goodbyes. As for what followed...

[This video has been altered to protect the identity of the persons on camera.]

“At that moment, I was sure I’d never see Ling’s smiling face again.”

“I expected to see her beaten to a pulp.”

“So this was her fate...”

“Death is the only reward for turning against mein Lehrerin. That doesn’t mean that I didn’t pity her.”

“She was a trustworthy friend... A kind mother... A talented teacher... Uh, what else goes on a tombstone?”

—R.I.P. Huang Lingyin.

Chapter IV: Tea Party in the Secret Garden

“Whoa!” I jerked stock-straight, dripping with sweat, from a nightmare where Rin died. “I just dreamed about Rin dying...”

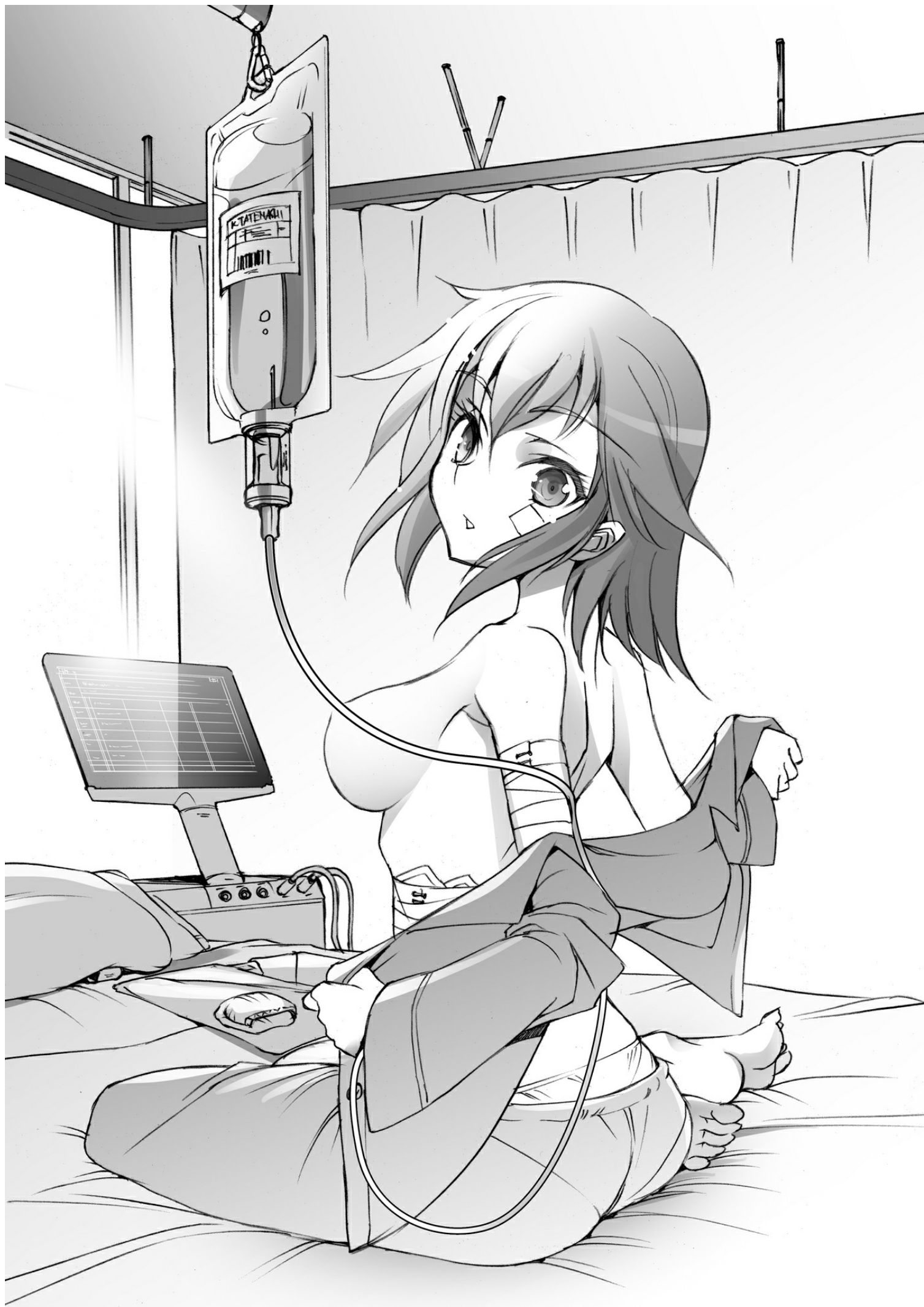
Eh? Where am I?

“The nurse’s office... No. The school hospital.”

A wing of IS Academy equipped with all the medical technology you’d find in a research hospital. *It feels like I’ve been ending up here a lot lately.* Even the bed seemed to be the same one I was in after the attack on the school.

“You’re awake now?”

Huh? Someone was in the bed next to mine. I pulled the curtain back, only to reveal a bra-less Tatenashi changing her top. Her breasts, just as beautifully curved as always, jiggled.



“Whooooah! Sorry, sorry!”

Panicking, I yanked the curtain shut, but it was too late. Mysterious Lady’s lance came thrusting through a moment later.

“I-chi-ka. You know you shouldn’t be doing that kind of thing,” she giggled.

“Really, I’m sorry! I’ll do anything! Just forgive me!”

The lance stopped its slow thrust, and she replied, “An-y-thing?”

Ugh. I was going to regret saying that.

“Well, anything possible...” I nervously doubled down. It wasn’t like I had much choice. The tip of the lance was barely a centimeter from my neck.

“Well, then—” she said with a nervous swallow. *Huh...?* “Do... Do something dirty with me, too...”

.....

.....

.....

“Eh...?”

“I heard all about it from Kanzashi! I know exactly what you got up to in cyberspace without even asking me! Without approval from the student council! Without permission from the student council president!”

“Wait, that was just, umm, that was just a trap the attacker—”

“Oh, you’re making excuses now? Really? You think excuses will work?”

I wondered why she was so mad about it. There must have been some kind of miscommunication...

“Tatenashi, can you just calm down for a second?”

If she didn’t, I was probably going to get skewered.

“You think I can be calm about this?!” The lance pushed in further, its tip breaking the skin on my neck.

“Whoa! Just put this thing away!”

“Ah, sorry...”

Her voice suddenly calmed, as the lance dissolved into light. And for a moment after, we sat in silence. I leaned toward the hole in the curtain left by the lance to take a peek, but at the same time, Tatenashi did too.

“.....!!”

We each pulled back suddenly. What a mess.

“Er, Ichika...”

“Y-Yes?”

“Can I come over there?”

“Okay?” I replied. What was she planning?

“But turn around first!”

“O-Okay!” I turned my back to her bed. As I did, I heard the curtain open and her footsteps on the floor.

“Um, Tatenashi?”

“W-What?”

“Why are you in my bed?”

“Because I’m injured.”

That was true. But it wasn’t what I meant, so I repeated, “I mean, why are you in *my* bed?!”

“It’s okay if we don’t face each other, right?”

“Eh? Er, yeah, I guess. Okay.”

Whoops, I probably shouldn’t have said ‘okay.’

“...All right.” What was she up to? “Ah. Thanks.”

“Huh?”

“For saving me...”

“Well, I mean, I couldn’t not do it.”

“Still... It made me happy.”

“Understood.”

Surprised by how forceful her voice suddenly was, I stiffened my back.

“.....”

“.....”

We lay there quietly. I couldn’t tell how long it lasted, but her warmth on my back was making my heart race.

“Um, Ichika. Remember how I told you that ‘Tatenashi’ was the name given to the head of the Sarashiki family?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, I remember,” I replied. Where did that come from all of a sudden?

“I... I’ll tell you my real name,” she whispered softly in my ear. As my heart pounded at the heat of her breath, she whispered, quietly but firmly. “Sarashiki Katana.”

With that, she beat a quick retreat to her own bed. *Her real name, huh.* I didn’t understand why she chose to tell me that, but I was happy that I knew a little bit more about her.



At a seashore café next to a park somewhere near IS Academy, a girl sat alone at a table. Her name was Chloe Chronicle. The pilot of the IS Kurokagi. A woman who had sworn loyalty to Tabane.

Mission complete. I’ve got to get away from here. Her untouched latte had long since cooled, and just as she stood to leave it behind...

“Mind if I sit with you?”

With a sudden twinge, the girl, usually so calm, felt her heart leap from her chest. Even with her eyes closed, she recognized it from recordings.

“Orimura... Chifuyu...”

“Have a seat. Let me get you a coffee. Is black okay?”

“.....”

She couldn't get away. She could feel it instinctively, and had no choice but to sit down as she stewed in dread. With trembling hands, she took the coffee mug.

"All right, I'll start this from the bottom line. Tell Tabane to keep her nose where it belongs."

I'm going to have to kill her. Just as the thought rose to Chloe's mind, Chifuyu spoke, "C'mon. Don't even think about it. You know you'd have no chance. Not even with your IS."

".....!" Chloe's eyes snapped open, revealing one with a striking dark white and golden iris.



“An endoskeletal IS, huh. Tabane’s that far ahead of the rest of the world?” Chifuyu sighed and set down her own mug, and suddenly, the world went white around her. “I see. So in cyberspace you can hack into people’s minds, and in reality you can manipulate the air around them to create illusions. Pretty impressive.”

As she muttered, Chifuyu swatted away Chloe’s dagger with one hand while picking up a spoon from the table and scooping away at the whiteness surrounding her with the other.

“Want your eyes to be next?”

Chloe recognized her defeat. Without protest, she dropped her illusion.

“Very well, then.” Chifuyu drank the rest of her coffee in one gulp and stood up. “Actually, did you want to meet your sister?”

“That... That isn’t my sister... I’m the incomplete version... She’s the perfected Laura Bodewig...” Pausing, she added, “I’m Chloe. Chloe Chronicle.”

The name Tabane had given to her. Satisfied, Chifuyu rose with an ‘I see’ and left. Chloe waited for a while, sipping the still-warm coffee.

“It’s bitter...”

She, too, stood and left the café. Not realizing she was being tailed.



“And... Ahh, perfect.”

In a hotel suite, Squall finished her preparations with a spray of perfume. She looked as stunning as ever in a dress worth thousands of dollars. A necklace studded with diamonds glimmered around her collar, as more decorated her earrings, rings, and bracelet.

Beside her, M silently sat, idly fidgeting with her locket while staring off into space.

“What’s wrong, M? Unhappy about getting dragged to another business lunch?”

“...I have no reason to go with you.”

“But you do! I need a bodyguard, don’t I?”

“Don’t make me laugh.”

M—Orimura Madoka—knew enough about the capabilities of Squall’s IS that she couldn’t take it as anything but irony.

“Shall we get going?”

“Hmph.”

“C’mon, smile a little more. It’s not every day that you get the chance to meet *the* Shinonono Tabane.”

Madoka followed Squall, not so much resigned to the request as resigned to following orders.



“Mmm. This meat is delicious! Oh, and more wine please!”

The woman energetically munching and chugging her way through a meal was none other than the once-in-a-generation genius IS inventor, Shinonono Tabane. How she had managed to convince Tabane, the world’s most wanted woman, to meet for lunch at this underground restaurant was Squall’s secret.

“Are you enjoying your meal, Dr. Tabane?”

“Hm? Oh, I’m enjoying all of it. Except for the drugged soup, that’s not really my thing.”

Squall’s expression didn’t flinch for a moment, even with her plan foiled. If anything, she was more surprised that Tabane had finished the bowl with no ill effects than that she’d detected it. *I suppose it was to be expected. This is Shinonono Tabane.* Perching her elbows on the table, Squall kept up her grin.

“Anyway, Dr. Tabane. Have you considered my proposal?”

“Proposal? Which one?”

“Of building a new IS for Phantom Task. With core included, of course.”

“Ahahaha. No way. That’d be way too much work,” Tabane blithely replied, having as much as admitted that she could still produce new IS cores.

“Is there anything I can do to change your mind?”

“Not really. Oh, can I have some cake? And a hamburger, and some curry, and maybe a bowl of noodle salad.” Tabane gnawed at a spare rib as she mischievously ran down the menu with added orders.

“Ahh. So there’s nothing at all I can do to convince you?”

“Pretty much.”

“How about this?” Squall snapped her fingers. Like something out of a movie, Autumn stepped forward, a knife held to a bound Chloe’s neck. “What if we rounded off your meal with a nice fresh steak?”

“Let...”

“Mm?”

“Let her go.” A grin floated to Tabane’s face, as in one sweeping motion she flung all the knives and forks on the table at Squall’s face.

“.....?!”

Leaping off Squall’s instinctive defensive crouch, she rebounded from the ceiling with a kick and flew toward Autumn. As Autumn brandished the knife, Tabane twisted her wrist and shoved, plunging it into Autumn’s right lung.

“Wh—”

With three quick palm strikes to her left shoulder, breast, and gut, Autumn was pushed back, away from Chloe. A final kick sent her tumbling back into the wine cellar with a crash of breaking bottles.

“Kuu, you okay? No ouchies?”

“Y-Yes...” Chloe tore the ropes binding her apart bare-handedly while smiling at Tabane.

“Y’know, everyone keeps calling me a genius, but there’s more to me than just my brains,” Tabane giggled as she wrapped her arms around Chloe from behind. “My body, and every cell in it, is superior too.”

Squall had miscalculated badly. She’d thought that, even if a hostage didn’t do the trick, in a worst-case scenario, she could get what she wanted with her IS

Golden Dawn. But then—this. If Tabane fought seriously, even an IS may not be enough. No, just starting up her IS may well have left her vulnerable for too long.

“You’d better be on Chichan’s level if you want to take me on bare-handed.”

Squall ground her teeth as she glared at Tabane’s back. But then the tides turned.

“Don’t move!”

Hearing the commotion, Madoka burst into the restaurant from her position outside, her IS Silent Zephyrus already open. *Perfect! Great timing, M!* This at least made the odds 50/50—no, her relief came too soon.

“Well isn’t that a fascinating IS you’ve got there.” Tabane closed the distance in an instant, perching herself on the tip of Madoka’s rifle.

“.....?!”

Just as a shocked Madoka stirred to sweep her away, Tabane reached down and began tearing it into pieces with her bare fingers. Her bits and armor fled too, dissolving into sparkling light like a blizzard of cherry petals. Finally, just as she tore apart Silent Zephyrus’s helmet, Tabane stopped.

“Hmm? Hmmmmmmmm?”

“.....”

Pausing, she stared at Madoka’s face. Madoka stood stock-still. If she moved, even her body would be torn apart.

“Aha!”

“.....?”

“Ahahahaha! What’s your name?”

Madoka wavered at the sudden burst of laughter.



“Ahahaha. Why don’t you let me guess? Hahaha!” Tabane, seemingly erupting in laughter, clutched her tummy. “Orimura... Madoka, isn’t it?”

“.....?!” Squall and Madoka’s jaws dropped in shock.

“I was right! Hehehe, I knew it!” After a moment’s thought, Tabane turned to Squall. “You should have told me it was for her! I’ll do it.”

“Eh—” Madoka gasped in surprise.

“But, hahaha! You’ve got to let me have her. C’mon, c’mon, can I keep her? Pleeeeeease?”

“That doesn’t exactly fit my plans,” Squall scowled. Madoka was the one person she could really rely on. Without her, when the time came to put everything into play, Squall knew she’d regret it.

“C’mon, share. Okay, okay, fine. C’mon, Madocchi, tell me what kind of IS you want! A sniper? A close-in fighter? Something with a lot of tricks up its sleeve? Maybe you want to be tanky! Or would you rather float like a butterfly?”

Tabane’s eyes glimmered with creativity, like a child holding a crayon.

“Whatever, we can figure it out later. Let’s all sit down and have a good meal! Kuu, Madocchi, you two are never gonna grow up big and strong if you don’t eat right!”

Tabane laughed and flounced her ample breasts, as the others watched dumbfounded.



“Ah...”

Several days after the hacking incident, I unfortunately stumbled into the five people I’d been doing my best to avoid—Houki, Rin, Cecilia, Charl, and Laura. It was in the dining hall in the first year dorms. They must have been waiting for me.

“Oh, wait, I forgot something in my room,” I showily intoned, making a U-turn.

“Wait!”

“Hold it right there!”

“Hold up!”

“Halt.”

“Can you hold on a minute?”

Ugh. They had me.

“W-What’s up...” I muttered.

“You’ve been avoiding us, haven’t you.”

Twitch.

“Ichika! What’s gotten into you?! This is no way to treat a lady!”

Wait, you’re the one acting hurt?

“Hmph! He knows he’s done something he should be ashamed of!”

“I should be saying that to you!” I interjected.

“Whaa?!”

“What kind of gentleman are you?”

“What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Explain yourself, Ichika!”

“Yeah!”

I cleared my throat and argued right back at those angry faces, “All of you! Are those fantasies really what you think of me?! I’ve been too embarrassed to even want to see your faces!”

“Ah...?”

“Uh, well...”

“Do you mean...”

“Like, in cyberspace?”

“I thought I told you to forget about that!”

Seeing their guilt, I pressed them further, “How the heck am I supposed to

forget about that?!”

My yelling got the attention of my other classmates, “What’s going on? Did something happen between Orimura and the other cadets?”

“It just never stops with you, does it, Orimu.”

Within seconds, a commotion formed around us. And worst of all, the second-year Mayuzumi was there too. Dammit, this was probably gonna end up in the school paper now...

“I think I just heard ‘fantasies’ and ‘embarrassed’!”

“Ooh, that’s great! Any other juicy tidbits?”

“I’ve noticed that lately he’s been avoiding everyone but Kanzashi.” As soon as Miss Casual said that, they all turned to glare at Kanzashi.

“...Eh?”

A piece of broccoli fell from her mouth. That was good. She was eating her greens.

“And Laura said to forget about something!”

“That’s right! Something must have happened! I can feel my pen calling out to me!”

I give up.

“Our cute little boy is finally going on the attack!”

“Squeee! Orimura finally looked down and found his balls!”

“I thought he’d just keep playing hard to get forever!”

“He’s an animal! No, he’s a beast!”

‘The forbidden beast mode!’ I heard someone shout. What the hell was...

“What is this ruckus?”

Everyone suddenly froze. That ice-cold voice could only be Chifuyu.

“Ah, Chifuyu, this is—”

“Call me Ms. Orimura.”

Pow! Thank you for the lesson...

“Now get outta here! Jeez...”

At least my mess of an evening had finally come to a close... Or so I thought.



Late at night, in the dorm hallway.

“Ah.”

“Ah...”

Two shadows stood before a nameplate reading ‘Orimura.’ One was a willowy, energetic-looking girl with twin pigtails. One was a classy-looking girl with long curled hair and a model’s figure.

“Cecili—”

“Li—”

Remembering where they were, they each clasped a palm to their mouth, before continuing on in whispers.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same, Ling. And why are you half naked?”

“Who dresses up to go to bed? And what about you, Cecilia? Who are you trying to impress with your rack hanging out like that?”

“Wh-What? This is my normal sleepwear.”

“All right, so go to bed then instead of hanging around here.”

“That’s what I was about to tell you! Go back to your room and—”

Rrrrrrip.

“What?!”

Hearing something tear, Ling and Cecilia kicked down the door.

“Target secured.”

“Laura, are you sure we should be—”

“Ah!”

“Ah.”

The duos of Cecilia/Ling and Laura/Charlotte stared at each other for a moment.

“Charlotte! Take Ichika and get out of here!”

“Got it...! Wait, what?” Charlotte glanced down at the face of her captive.

“Mm! Mmmph!” It was their assistant homeroom teacher, Ms. Yamada Maya.

“W-W-What on Earth are you doing?! What’s gotten into you?!”

“Ms. Yamada?! W-Why...”

“Ms. Orimura told me to sleep here tonight!”

“Then, um... Where’s Ichika?”

“He’s sleeping in Ms. Orimura’s room!”

“Guh.” Rin’s displeasure was plainly visible in her expression.

“Very well, then, I’ll be taking my leave.” Cecilia swiftly moved to flee.

“Returning to base for some rest.” Laura perched on the windowsill, ready to leap.

“Sounds like a good idea!” Charlotte piggybacked onto her.

“See you later!”

As the four winked at each other, Maya wrapped the arms of her IS around them and grumbled, “...I have a lecture for you tonight!”

Two others listened in on the commotion from around the corner.

“It’s a good thing we didn’t join in,” said Houki.

“Correct,” replied Kanzashi.

It was a long, sleepless night for the four who were caught...

Epilogue: The Knight Rests Under the Cherry Trees

In the secret complex underneath IS Academy, Chifuyu gazed at a stone statue connected to dozens of cables. The statue was all that remained of Kurezakura, the IS which had given her the title of strongest woman in the world. The knight which had sacrificed everything to protect Chifuyu in a duel slept, still showing no signs of awakening.

“I understand what’s in the program Tabane sent. It... It’s the program to awaken you again.”

Her fingertips brushed over Kurezakura. It had the slight chill of true stone. But within it, she could feel the heat of its ‘will.’

“When you wake up, it’ll be time to settle things for good.” Chifuyu was sometimes forlorn, sometimes adamant as she whispered.

“What are you going to do with me?” Squad Leader spoke from the doorway, where she’d been waiting.

“Send you back to the Americans, I guess.”

“.....” She was shocked, having expected Chifuyu to have some sort of plan for her.

“If we keep you locked up here, it’ll create an international incident. Even with the exceptions IS Academy gets.”

Meaning, she was to be set free. Somehow, Squad Leader couldn’t bring herself to accept this, and surprised even herself as she argued, “But surely I have value as a hostage? You could use me in negotiations—”

“Hmph. I don’t have any need to do that.”

She stumbled back as if struck by Chifuyu’s forceful insistence. As if shot straight through the heart she thought she’d torn out.

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“Stealth channel... xxx0891-DA.” She formed the words quietly but precisely, even though she couldn’t bring herself to look straight at Chifuyu. “You can use it to contact me...”

“I see. I’ll remember that.”

Chifuyu patted her head. Her cheeks flushed red, and she spun and scampered off as if making an escape.

“Not the type for goodbyes, huh,” Chifuyu said with a satisfied sigh. Resting her hands on her curved hips, she stretched her back. “I still won’t let you win, Tabane.”

Afterword: Deneb, Altair, and Vega. That's the Summer Triangle you pointed at.

Hi, it's Yumizuru again. It sure has been a long time since we've been able to chat in a café like this, hasn't it? If I take a bite out of this Apple I'll probably lose a tooth, though. Since it has Gorilla Glass.

Anyway, here it is: Infinite Stratos Volume 8. Sorry to keep you waiting. Somehow, after everything, Overlap ended up deciding to put it out. I'm grateful. And what's really an honor is to have illustrations by CHOCO. There's the *ga* from the title, manga. I've known about his work since I bought Ignazero in my second year of high school. Cute girls popping out of computer screens, fighting a demon in a fantasy world, and even twisting the laws of causality to battle space monsters—and now, that same artist is drawing for IS. It's hard to believe we ended up collaborating. But I couldn't be happier.

Anyway! Nothing more to say about volume 8! It was a huge pain in the butt! That's it! I'm going back to fluffy romcom style for volume 9. I just want to write cutesy stories! Cutesy, you hear?! I've had enough of battles! I'm worn out. See you next time!

— Izuru Yumizuru

Oh, right, I'm supposed to write two pages here. Um... *B.* Behind, I got so behind! I always thought that it really sucked for manga artists when they got dragged into editor meetings to meet deadlines. Yet here I am doing it myself! I did it with the book, and now I'm doing it again with this afterword... Honestly, I'm sorry. I'll try to get volume 9 done early! (*I say this every time.*)

This releases April 25th, doesn't it? *R.* Releases. Right around when Dragon's Dogma comes out. I'll do the playing for all of us, so you guys can finish reading IS first! Send in those surveys! I'd like to do a character popularity survey, it's been a while. And then I'd be able to write something nice for the first place. If

only... If only... But nah, there's no way to make that work, is there.

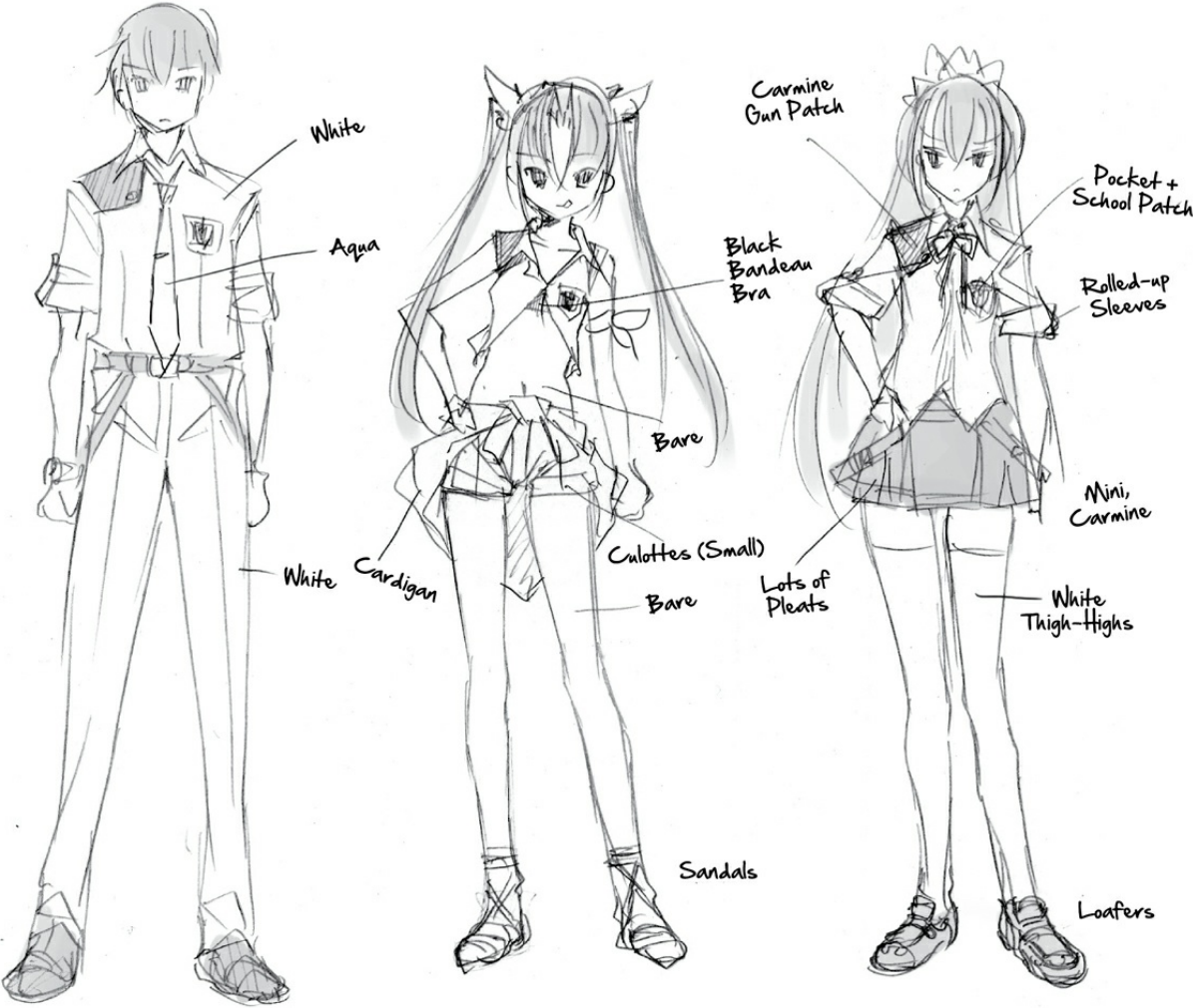
Oh, and I've been having lots of fun with the new JoJo fighter. I'm terribad at fighting games, but I'm still gonna buy a copy.

"I'm holding up the press!" and they'd go, "Dammit, Yumizuru!" (*I would get killed if I tried this.*)

I've really got a thing for Kuroiel lately. Even more of one if imagining her with four legs, a pair of blade arms, a missile pod, and an angel's halo. (And maybe a pair of shotguns!)

I wish they'd give me and CHOCO our own segment on Radio IS. Maybe something where we could write a scene based on requests, and then send it over to the rest of the cast or something. Oh, I'm out of room on page 2.

By Izuru Yumizuru.

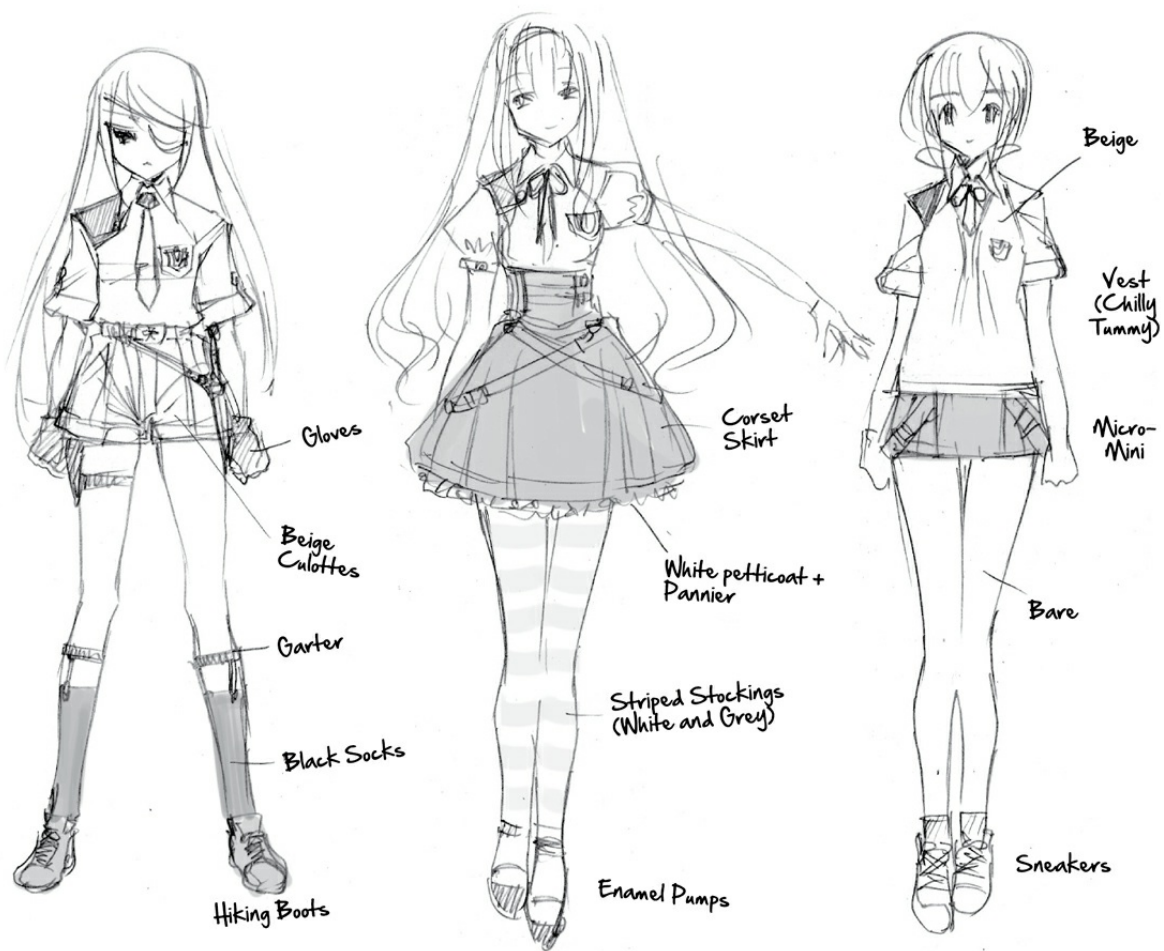


Ichika

Ling

Houki

Subject	IS Academy Summer Uniform Model Sheet	Date
		: 2013 / New Year's
		Time
☒ Rough ☐ Cleanup ☐ Afterword		: The morning sun is bright.
CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI		chocolateshop@mac.com http://chocolateshop-float.com



Laura

Cecilia

Charl

Subject	Celebration of Vol. 8 Release	
	Date	: 2013 / My Second Daughter Was Born.
☐ Rough ☐ Cleanup	☒ Afterword	Time
		: Daddy had to work that day.
CHOCO MUGITANI KOICHI		chocolateshop@mac.com http://chocolateshop-float.com

One color insert even lewder than normal, and one that reeks of oil and cordite. They both took a loooooong time. And in the meantime, while I'm drawing, my second daughter is being born at the obstetrician's near my office. Lewds! Robots! Babies! Lewds! Waaaaah!

CHOCO



Here's Ms. Yamada's gallant pose with her six-legged Rafale Revive and quad gatling guns that are blocked by Chifuyu in the color version.

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Infinite Stratos: Volume 8

by Izuru Yumizuru

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Edited by Meiru

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